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Ausencia: A Novella

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Ausencia: A Novella

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Forgetting someone is like forgetting to turn off the light
in the backyard so it stays lit all the next day

But then it is the light that makes you remember.

-Yehuda Amichai

Buenos Aires, Argentina—Julio 1976

Someone was watching.

Daniel could feel it like an invisible spotlight following him, tracing his every movement, illuminating the outline of his body against the dark foliage of the surrounding park. As he and Zaydel walked the circular path of *Parque Centenario*, Daniel imagined himself an escaped prisoner, the spotlight creeping along in harmony with the rough scrape of his boots on the pavement. Somewhere beyond the path, beyond the still water of the park's central pond, the spotlight's operator would be lurking, waiting for just the right moment to reveal his presence and bring the fugitives back into custody.

Daniel risked a glance over his shoulder, but the park was deserted: no spotlight operator, no guards hiding behind trees with guns aimed at his chest. There was no movement at all, except for the flickering shadows under the lamplights that lined the path. Rather than assuage Daniel's fears, this total absence of observable life only added to the gnawing feeling that pitted in his stomach. The winter air felt cool and dense against his face, and he sucked in his cheeks, shivering slightly.

He thought of Marcela, who was at this moment likely turning in her sleep, pulling the sheets out from Daniel's side of the bed. Marcela slept just like she lived, in constant motion. When they'd first moved in together 6 years before, Daniel had been surprised by the strength in her slender arms when she stole the covers or squeezed his arm in the midst of a bad dream. What would his wife say if she realized he was not, as he had told her, working late at the jewelry store downtown, but was instead creeping around empty parks, jumping at his own shadow? Nothing good, he was sure.

Daniel turned back around, but Zaydel had already hobbled on ahead to a small carousel at the end of the path.

"*Che*, are you sure we're alone?" Daniel's breath formed a small pocket of condensation against the opaque air. It was a cold night, even for July, and with his gloveless hands stuffed in his pockets, Daniel found himself wishing for September, when at last spring would show its face again and the parks of Buenos Aires would recapture some of their charm.

"We are never alone," gruffed Zaydel, his sandpaper voice weaseling up his throat. "*Adonai* is always with us, always watching. A covenant with *Avraham*—I will make you a mighty people, a chosen people." He lowered himself onto the platform of the carousel and stretched his legs along the steps. The only light came from the moon, half-obscured by a cloud of pollution, and from a few streetlights whose subtle glow cast shadows over the empty park. As Zaydel gingerly rubbed his right knee, his face caught hold of the light. The shadows danced across the maze of scars and wrinkles, and outlined the white of Zaydel's hair. He looked older, Daniel decided.

"You know that's not what I mean." Daniel tiptoed over Zaydel's outstretched legs and climbed atop a blue horse whose front legs were suspended upward in a frozen dance. The seat was too small for his lanky body, and the gold-painted wooden saddle groaned under his weight.

"Oh, you mean you want to be alone?" smirked Zaydel. "You don't want anyone following you around, watching you shit and fuck? Well too bad for you, boy. God hears your prayers but He sees your sins too."

Zaydel reached into a leather messenger bag at his side and pulled out a liter bottle of *Quilmes*. He pulled off the cap and took a long drag of the beer before passing it off to his younger companion. "Have some of this, boy, it's good for the soul."

Daniel waved the bottle away, impatient. "I only meant right now, in this moment. I feel like someone else is here. Don't you sense it?"

"Suit yourself." Zaydel shrugged and took a few more generous gulps of the amber liquid. "This park is as safe as anywhere. And even if there were someone, what difference would it make? *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not fear.* Now. Would you mind sharing why you've dragged me all the way out here to sit in the cold at 2 in the damn morning? I'm too old for this secret meeting stuff, *carajo.*"

Daniel smiled. There was something about Zaydel, something about the stubborn faith that hid between his rough edges, which always managed to put Daniel at ease. It was as if, from the depths of Zaydel's bitter devotion, he could project that sense of security onto others. Daniel's shoulders relaxed against the cold metal pole that held the horse in place. He hadn't realized how tense he was. But then, he was always tense these days, everyone was. The coup four months earlier had left a trail of nervous energy in its wake.

Daniel couldn't say he had been completely surprised when the tanks rolled out around *La Casa Rosada*, the radios announcing Isabelita's arrest and the institution of a new *junta militar* to keep order. Argentine politics had been a jumbled cycle of new regimes since Perón's exile in 55, each more unstable than the last. At 27, Daniel felt like he had lived through more governments than most people experienced in a lifetime.

After the excitement of each coup died down, life continued on mostly as it always had. People returned to their jobs, former government employees excluded that is, and settled back into the rhythm of their daily lives. That was always the strangest thing about a coup—no one ever seemed to want to acknowledge it had actually happened. For his part, Daniel kept waking up every morning to go into the jewelry shop, kept setting diamonds in engagement rings and

polishing silver necklaces until they sparkled. Weddings and birthdays would keep happening, new government or not.

The most recent power change had followed mostly the same pattern as the previous ones, but there were subtle differences. Although the streets remained peaceful, an undercurrent of fear had made its way into the heart of Buenos Aires. Like the underground river that flowed deep beneath the pavement of *Avenida Juan B. Justo*, carrying excess water from *Río de la Plata* deep into the earth, this fear seemed to have made its mark on the city without anyone really knowing it was there. Rumors had begun to circulate—terrible rumors about older couples waking to the sounds of gunshots in their buildings, about students who failed to return home from their evening classes. But rumors were just that, Daniel reminded himself, just unfounded whispers from gossipy old women. In his own life he had seen no tangible change from the coup except for this newfound obsession with looking over his shoulder on a regular basis.

Still, the political climate was uncomfortable enough that Daniel wanted guidance before he got involved with anything that might be considered...controversial. And when he wanted guidance of any sort, Zaydel was the man to speak to. Nearly old enough to be his grandfather, Zaydel had been a close friend of Daniel's father before his death, and had grown close to Daniel after. For all his grumbling, he always seemed to know exactly the right thing to do.

"Zaydel, I've known you all my life. You've got to know I trust you."

"Poor judgment, boy," said Zaydel. "Don't trust anyone but *Adonai*. And even He's not so trustworthy these days."

"Zaydel, I'm serious."

"Well so am I."

Daniel reached into his own bag and, with a nervous glance at Zaydel, pulled out a bundle of papers. They were damaged at the edges, the corners curled and ripping. Daniel handled them with extreme care, as if they were rare, ancient texts that might be damaged by even the delicate touch of his fingertips.

"I wanted to show you something," he said. "Pablo had these printed in the *fotocopiadora* on *Lavalle*. He has a connection there—a friend's little brother. He charges cheap and doesn't ask questions."

"Silence is never cheap," Zaydel reprimanded, but he glanced curiously at the stack of papers anyway. "Boy, you know I can't read in this damned darkness."

Daniel held the papers up to toward the lamplight and read the printed type aloud:

UNA DISCUSIÓN SOBRE EL ESTADO DEL PAIS.

An open meeting to discuss the future of our country
Sábado the 24th of Julio at—

Zaydel snatched the papers away before Daniel could finish. He squinted at the thin surface of the photocopied sheets and traced his fingers along the words, back and forth in a slow, steady line. Daniel watched as Zaydel began to flip through the entire stack, pausing at each page before moving on to the next. He appeared to be looking for something, but Daniel had no idea what. After a few moments, Zaydel folded the first paper in half and started shredding it to pieces.

"You're an idiot, boy. What do you think you're doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm distributing these fliers for Pablo. He's hosting a meeting to gage the political climate in *Villa Crespo*. To see where people stand, how they feel about the new administration."

"Idiot," Zaydel repeated. "Look at yourself. Big-eyed, baby-faced, and as naive as your father. You've got a wife and child now. You've got a good job and food on your table. So what could you possibly have to discuss at some 'open meeting,' huh? You're too old to be running around with silly fliers like some university kid with a stick up his ass."

Daniel winced, his pride wounded. He wasn't sure what he had expected from Zaydel, but it was not such strong and immediate derision. Still, he attempted to defend himself.

"I'm not trying to cause any trouble. And you know I'm not just running around protesting whatever comes my way like all those hippies out there, so don't you dare put me in the same category. But I *do* have things to protest, especially where the new *junta* is involved. It's not right, what they're doing to the *Montoneros*, even if they are guerrillas. Everybody deserves a fair trial."

Daniel looked up at Zaydel, expecting a sarcastic comment. But Zaydel was too busy chugging the *Quilmes* to interject.

"Pablo's been talking about maybe starting up a newspaper," Daniel continued. "One with articles that come directly from the community for once. *La Nación* and *Clarín* are full of conservative propaganda crap, and everyone knows it. Maybe if we feed some dialogue back into the political system, then we will see a positive change for once."

Pablo was Daniel's best friend and former roommate. They had met the first day of university when Pablo handed Daniel a petition against the decrepit classroom conditions of the social science building and asked if he was interested in joining the University of Buenos Aires chapter of *Estudiantes Socialistas*. Daniel had never had much interest in politics before, but there was something contagious about Pablo's haughty smile and lofty ideas. He knew how to command a person's attention, how to transform even the most mundane of events into

something that made you grip the edge of your chair in suspense. It was a trait Daniel wished he himself possessed.

They had become fast friends, sharing their mutual love of philosophy, rare edition comic books, and cheap cigarettes. Pablo would go on and on about Marxist theory, while Daniel would gush about his design classes and would bring home new paintings to decorate their otherwise dull apartment. After they graduated from the university, Pablo's political spirit had only amplified, while Daniel had decided to propose to Marcela. Even though Pablo thought Daniel had "fallen into the domestic trap that plagues this society," they remained close, and Pablo had become good friends with Marcela as well. Even now, Pablo still never failed to rally Daniel's interest in a cause, and Daniel was beginning to take on the same sort of passion as his friend.

"And anyway, Zaydel," continued Daniel, "last I heard freedom of speech wasn't a crime."

Zaydel snorted. "Not yet, anyway. And if you were so sure of yourself, you sure as hell wouldn't be here with me right now, looking over your shoulder like a damn fool." He threw the now-empty *Quilmes* from the carousel steps to the grass, where it hit with a dull thud. "Let me tell you something, boy. In this world of *mierda*, there's no such thing as open dialogue. There are only the people you are trying to screw, and the people trying to screw you more. And God knows everyone's always trying to screw the Jews the most. So do yourself a favor and don't make it any easier for them."

Daniel sighed. "Jew or *goy*, I have a feeling it might not make a difference either way. I've heard things...people being called for court appointments and not coming back, some of my old professors resigning from class in the middle of the semester. Something's off about it, Zaydel. Something's not right."

And there it was—the real reason Daniel wanted to talk with Zaydel. He didn't need a seal of approval for his actions, what he needed was for Zaydel to tell him that everything was fine, that this nagging unease Daniel carried around was misplaced.

"Psshhhh" huffed Zaydel. "All governments are trouble. One coup after another, it's like dominoes. *La Argentina* as we know it has gone to shit. I came to this country with nothing, you know that? I came with only the money I had in my pocket and the clothes on my back and my mother's prayer that I would make something of my life and not be damned to hell like the rest of the *shtetl* I grew up in. I worked my whole life trying to build something in this country, something to call my own. And what do all these politicians do? They accuse me of dirtying their society with communism, invite Nazis into my home, let the economy go to shit..."

Daniel nodded in agreement, but he had stopped listening. Zaydel's rants were always the same—a bitter account of the "Jewish plight" as he called it, sprinkled with colorful anecdotes from his own life, and always a steady string of complaints. Daniel knew by heart what came next—the pogroms in Russia, the difficult voyage across the Atlantic, the years of work on cattle ranches in Patagonia with other Jewish immigrants, followed by a return to Buenos Aires, where Zaydel had at last decided to settle.

Zaydel had already answered Daniel's question, in his way. He thought this government was no worse than the others, and if it was no worse than the others, that meant Daniel was no worse off than he had always been. And what was so risky about a newspaper anyway? Daniel asked himself. Nothing at all.

"Did you hear what I said, boy?" Zaydel slapped Daniel on the knee, snapping him back to the present moment.

"Huh?"

"I said I'm going to freeze to death if we stay out here any longer. And then you'll have an old man's death on your conscience on top of all the other crap already there."

Stiffly, Daniel rose to his feet and dismounted from the blue horse. The horse's painted face caught between the moonlight and the shadows of the lamps, and in the eerie half-light it looked almost alive. Daniel had the sensation that it might shake its mane at any moment and with a loud whinny gallop off into the streets of Buenos Aires. The feeling of someone watching returned. Daniel perceived movement, and turned sharply. But no, it was only a stray cat that slid around the backside of the carousel, meowing softly. Frightened by a kitten—Pablo would tease him mercilessly if he were there. Daniel let out a long breath and began to accompany Zaydel back to his apartment on *Angel Gallardo*.

Miami, Florida—April, 2011

The dragon was cornered. It took a step back against the wall of the cave and tried to spread its wings but there was no space. It breathed a raging gust of fire in anger and malice, but Jauffre jumped deftly out of the way. A skilled warrior, he had traveled too far to be defeated now. The dragon was the only thing left between Jauffre and the Amulet of Kings. In one smooth arc, he swung a giant axe at the dragon's neck. With a last defiant roar, the dragon exploded in a cloud of green smoke.

"BAM!" shouted Nico Stepensky in triumph. "Level 20 defeated!"

"Yeah well don't let it go to your head, there's still another 8 to go," said Nico's friend Jonny. "And everyone knows that the Cloud Ruler Temple is about a billion times harder than the dragon's lair. You sure you don't want to spend the night?"

"Can't, dude. It's Friday night. Gotta get back for Shabbat dinner." Nico didn't look at Jonny as he spoke. They both sat on the couch of Jonny's living room with their hands glued to their X-Box controllers and eyes trained on the TV screen, where Nico was in the process of buying a new supply of weapons for Jauffre in preparation for level 21.

"Aw c'mon, just stay another hour," insisted Jonny. "Can't you blow off the Jew stuff just for once?"

"You know how my Ma gets," said Nico. "She will literally kill me, you know she will." But, against his better judgment, he was already pressing the start button for level 21.

Well over an hour later, Nico pedaled as fast as he could toward his house, his bicycle swerving in and out of the winding streets of his neighborhood. As he biked, the textbooks in Nico's backpack juttred into his shoulder blades and his shaggy black hair fell into his eyes, but he didn't slow down. However, the sun was already setting behind the palm trees that lined the neighborhood streets, and with a sinking feeling Nico realized there was no point in rushing. He was already late.

Getting home before dark was crucial. *Especially* on a Friday. Nico pulled his bike up the driveway of his house and hesitated, sobered by the fact that he had managed to break two rules at the same time—the curfew rule *and* the Shabbat dinner rule.

The Stepensky family took their rules very seriously. They were a series of governing principles that had been so carefully cultivated in the Stepensky children that at fourteen, Nico had come to think of them as extensions of his very identity, underscoring his life in the most essential of ways. And to break the rules for something as ordinary as a video game—well, it wasn't worth the risk.

Nico opened the garage door to Peggy, the three-legged dog his family had adopted three years before. Nobody knew exactly how she had lost her front right paw. But she had kept showing up at their front yard until Nico convinced his family to let her stay permanently. As Nico stepped inside, Peggy barked loudly and tried to jump onto Nico, but lost her balance and stumbled sideways. She seemed to be the only one who noticed he was late, and it soon became apparent that there were bigger issues at stake than his delayed arrival. His older sister Cecilia was already home, and yelling something at their parents. Nico couldn't quite make out the full gist of what she was saying, but he was sure "cruel and unusual punishment" and "ethnocentrism" were among the words uttered. That would definitely come back to bite her. Among the many particularities of his family's private legal code, the mention of any words related to torture and abuse were strictly forbidden. As Nico entered the kitchen, he heard a door slam upstairs.

"Everything ok?" Nico asked. His mother Luz was hovering over a pot of chicken soup and gripping a ladle so tight that Nico was afraid the metal might bend in half in her hands. She closed her eyes and took a deep, measured breath.

"Oh, everything's fine!" chirped his father Isaac with forced optimism. "We were just having, as I'm sure you could tell, a very civil and reasonable conversation with your dear sister about why it is inappropriate to skip Friday night dinner in order to attend a Save-the-Gators rally with her gentile boyfriend, followed by an unsupervised social gathering of high school activists in a friend's basement. As you can see, she took our verdict quite splendidly, don't you think Luz?"

Luz pursed her lips and ran her free hand through her curly hair. It was hair that neither of her children had inherited, a wild bird's nest of reddish brown ringlets sticking out at all ends.

Both Cecilia and Nico had Isaac's hair, dark black and straight, but Luz's crazy locks had always fascinated Nico. When he was really young, he would come up behind her while she was reading on the couch and she would let him twirl the curls as she read.

"Please, Nico," said Luz. "Promise me just one thing. When you start high school next year, don't go forgetting who you are or where you come from."

"You have my word." Nico grinned, glad to be off the hook, even if it was at Cecilia's expense. But it was her own fault for being stupid enough to think their parents would let her cop out of dinner. Things had been tense enough between them recently anyway, ever since Ceci had started dating this guy named Raymond, a dread-locked college freshman who had introduced her to such terms as ethical reasoning, apolitical, and naturalism. Nico knew the new vocabulary was primarily Ray's influence because the week before he had accidentally walked in on them making out in the basement. Cecilia had just screamed and called him a nosy little shit, but Ray looked unconcerned, and all he said was "Don't worry about it, Nico. We were just reflecting on the nature of human want versus human need."

Nico didn't mind Ray so much, but his parents saw him as the nemesis of all things a Stepensky ought to value. His political influence on Cecilia alone was enough to drive Luz mad. She hated any and all politics so much that she would turn off the TV whenever anything remotely political was mentioned. This, combined with the fact that Ray wasn't Jewish, was more than enough to condemn him to Luz's blacklist. Cecilia was nearly there herself, given that she had broken one of the most essential of the Stepensky rules: A Stepensky never forgets where he comes from.

Nico and Cecilia were first-generation Americans. Their parents had both immigrated to the States as children and settled in Miami. But even 4,500 miles away, *La Argentina* was a

perpetual presence in the Stepenskys' lives. Instead of taking karate or playing tennis like all the other kids in their neighborhood, Nico and Cecilia had been forced to take tango lessons until at thirteen Cecilia had thrown such a tantrum that Luz and Isaac had eventually conceded to letting them quit. And when Luz and Isaac talked to Nico and Ceci in Spanish, they were insistent that they use the Argentine accent—"Remember chicos, no matter what your Cuban friends tell you, it's Cah-*SHeh*, not Cah-*Yeh*," Isaac insisted, only half joking. "Any child of mine caught speaking Cuban Spanish in this house will be thrown out immediately."

Another way Nico and Ceci remembered where they came from was through their parents' stories. When Nico was younger, his mother would tell him of *La Capital* as she remembered it. She was only 5 or 6 when she left, so who knows how much she actually remembered, but whether fact or imagination, her stories always captivated Nico. She would describe in detail the commanding skylines with European-inspired architecture, the buses crowded with commuting *Porteños*, as residents of the port city were often called, and the airy plazas where Argentine flags waved from the trees, covering the city in an elegant blue. Nico was especially fascinated by Luz's descriptions of the people—women with hair that fell all the way to their lower backs and dog walkers who were dragged down the street by more than 10 dogs at a time.

"*Porteños* are a colorful people," she would say as she tucked Nico beneath the covers. "A proud people. Like *los Judios*. Lucky you, to come from a blend of such resilient cultures." And this was the secondary clause of the "never forget where you come from" rule—a Stepensky never forgot he was Jewish. Fortunately, living in Miami, where the population was composed of about 90% old Jewish ladies driving town cars in the middle of two lanes, Nico found it hard to

forget that particular detail. Cecilia, on the other hand, was clearly verging into dangerous territory with her recent dating habits.

“She’s just being a teenager,” said Isaac sagely as he began to set the table.

“Nico’s a teenager, and he doesn’t act with such...such *blatant* disrespect.” Luz was still holding the ladle above the boiling soup, and Nico thought for a second she might slam it into a wall or throw it at the window across the room. Nico wouldn’t put it past her. Luz was generally soft-spoken and calm, but formidable when crossed. Sometimes even the smallest of things could set her off, and Nico was never sure quite how to make it on her good side.

“Nico’s a *young* teenager,” said Isaac. “He’ll have his time to blatantly disrespect you.”

Nico walked away from the counter and with a sigh sat down on the kitchen table. They always did this, carrying on as if he wasn’t there at all. Did they even realize they were talking right in front of him? What was the point of rushing to get home when once he arrived, they they acted like he wasn’t even there?

“Don’t worry though,” continued Isaac. “Cecilia will calm down in a while after she has some space. A Stepensky always moves forward.”

And there was another of the rules—the Move Forward Rule. Isaac was a particularly fervent advocate of this one. “The future is the answer!” he regularly declared. Completely obsessed but incompetent with new technology, in the past year alone he had purchased an iPad that he hadn’t realized was a touch-screen, a juicer from a late-night infomercial that had come with a 63-page instruction manual, and most recently, a GPS system that he had accidentally switched to an Australian accent and couldn’t figure out how to switch back.

But the Move Forward Rule was more nuanced in its application. While it was family policy to sit proudly on their identity, it was considered poor form to ask or talk about the past.

A Jewish proverb, *Gam Ze Ya'avov* was a commonly heard phrase in the Stepensky house—*This Too Shall Pass*. Bad things had their time, but good things did too. Everything ran its course and then slipped into the past to stay. One example of the Move Forward rule was a period of time in the second grade in which Nico had to wear a back brace for a while, and the kids in his class would tease him. Every day when he came home Nico would go straight to his room and start playing with his lego sets. Legos were his thing back then. If Nico were being completely honest with himself, they still were his thing. He liked to put things together, see how something great and new could form unexpectedly out of all those tiny pieces of plastic. Back when Nico would get teased, Isaac would come to his room to sit with him and watch him play, and sometimes he would help out with the Bat Mobile or whatever the latest creation was. And after a while he would always say, "Just keep moving forward, Nico-Lico, just keep moving forward."

Buenos Aires, Argentina—Abril 1977

"Daniel, did you remember to pick up the horseradish?" Marcela balanced on the kitchen counter and searched in a high cabinet for a set of dishes she was sure had been there the week before. As she reached into the cabinet, one of her many bracelets knocked against a wine glass, which wobbled precariously and threatened to tumble to a shattering death on the wood floor. Marcela stopped it from falling just in time. The dishes she was searching for had been a wedding gift from one of Marcela's great uncles in *Entre Ríos*. She and Daniel had never bothered to unpack them, agreeing that the ugly golden flowers decorating their border made them too hideous to use. But now, with nearly 20 guests expected to arrive at their apartment in a matter of hours, Marcela was regretting not keeping better track of the extra set.

"How could I forget," Daniel called from the living room, where he was busy setting up folding chairs. "It's not as if you asked me three times or anything..."

"Well what about the *matza*?"

"It's over on the dining room table. Just like it was when you asked 15 minutes ago."

"Oh...well can you double check we have—"

"Marcela, we *have* it," came Daniel's exasperated reply. He entered the kitchen and came up behind where Marcela stood on the counter. He kissed her on the back of her knees, and the bristles of his beard tickled her skin.

"Try to relax," Daniel breathed, and Marcela felt his smile before she saw it. She climbed down from the kitchen counter to the floor and turned to face her husband. She placed her hand on his cheek, brushing her fingers through the scruffy dark hair on his cheekbones. The beard was a new addition, an attempt to counteract the boyishness of Daniel's round face with a more distinguished look. But the end result didn't quite match Daniel's intention, giving the appearance more of unshaved laziness than sophistication. Marcela loved it all the same.

"I'm sorry," Marcela said. "I guess I'm just a little—"

"Crazy?" Daniel offered, but with a twinkle in his eye that let Marcela know he didn't mean it. "Delusional, obsessive-compulsive?"

Marcela acknowledged the teasing with a timid, close-mouthed smile. These days the line between jest and genuine irritation was a fine one indeed, and each day she balanced a treacherous tight rope between the two. Daniel had been so somber and detached the past few months that these moments of innocent banter, when they did come, felt refreshing, a glimpse into their lives when things were simpler.

"I was going for nervous."

It was their first *Pesaj* in the new Belgrano apartment, and Marcela wanted everything to go just right. It was funny, when she thought about it, that Daniel was the one to be so calm about everything, and Marcela the one to be acting “delusional.” It was she who had pushed for the *Pesaj Seder* in the first place. When she first broached the idea of hosting the traditional Passover dinner with Daniel, he had been resistant. “Too much of a hassle,” he had told her. “All that preparation, not to mention the money. We barely make rent in this new place as it is.”

It was a bullshit excuse. Money was tight, yes, but they were managing. Daniel was working his way up to a manager position at the jewelry shop and Marcela had recently begun teaching piano lessons from home so that she could earn some extra cash while staying home to watch their daughter. So Marcela refused to let the idea go.

“Can’t it just be the three of us?” Daniel had whined the third time Marcela brought it up. “Just you, me, and the baby. That’s all I want, just our little family enjoying our time together.”

“She’s nearly five, you know,” Marcela had chided. “Not so much a baby anymore.”

“She’ll always be a baby to me,” Daniel answered, with a fierceness that had made Marcela laugh. But still, she persisted. *Pesaj* had always been Marcela’s favorite holiday. She loved everything about it—the smell of matza ball soup and the elaborate meal and the singing late into the evening. And she loved the message of the holiday as well. It was a time to remember hardships, but also to celebrate freedom. *Once we were slaves in Egypt...* Now there was something worth remembering. Their ancestors had been slaves, forced to break their backs building cities for a culture that was not their own, forced to throw their first-born boys to the river. Yes, things could always be worse. Never mind the current political climate; never mind that she and Daniel had been fighting more and more often. At the very least, she was not a

slave. Her family and her first-born child were safe in the new apartment, and that was something worth celebrating.

"No, it can't just be the three of us," Marcela insisted. "I want to show off the new apartment to our friends. I want to play hostess for the evening and refill everyone's wine glasses and serve delicious food. I want Pablo to hide the *afikomen* in the most obscure corner of the house, and I want Zaydel to get so drunk he falls asleep—"

"Not like that's a rare occurrence," Daniel had interjected.

"—And I want just one evening with no politics and no fighting, is that too much to ask?"

Daniel sighed. "Marcela, you know I don't want to draw attention to where we live."

"It's that silly newspaper again, isn't it. I told Pablo it was too much pressure for you."

"It's not the paper. And when did you see Pablo anyway?"

"Oh, he stopped by last week, but you weren't home from work yet."

"He didn't wait for me to get home?"

"No, he said he had to run to a party meeting across town." It was the third time that Pablo had arrived at their apartment when only Marcela was home, and she was beginning to suspect he planned the mistimed visits intentionally. With a twang of guilt she realized she had come to look forward to his visits, to the attention of a man who was not Daniel.

"Well it's not that I don't want to see everyone. It's just, I worry..." He let the sentence trickle off unfinished. Marcela already knew all the potential endings—*I worry something will happen. I worry the government might find me. I worry we don't love each other like we used to.*

Marcela bottled these same worries, carried them around with her like rocks stuck in her shoes and slept on them at night. But this seder would be good for them, she was sure of it.

Newspapers and governments be damned, this seder would make things right again, would bring back that spark that seemed to have vanished from their lives.

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The problems had started the previous July. Daniel had called the house and given a rushed excuse about overtime at work—something about gemstone inventory. But he was always a terrible liar, and even through the phone Marcela could tell there was something else.

It occurred to her that maybe there was another woman.

She spent the entire night awake, imagining what the girl might look like—taller, definitely, and with longer hair that didn't stick out at all ends. She would have a good smile too, one that didn't have an overbite like Marcela's. Marcela imagined them out in Palermo Soho, giggling in each other's arms as Marcela and Daniel had done when they first started dating.

They had met after a long night of drinking at an overpriced bar in *Plaza Serrano*. Marcela had been standing by the pool table with her friend Ana, a fellow first-year music student at *la Universidad de Buenos Aires*. Ana was busy flirting with some longhaired man who had just bought them drinks and was now bragging about his new motorcycle. Marcela resisted the urge to roll her eyes. It was just like Ana to be drawn in by some *chamullero* within two minutes and forget Marcela was there entirely. Annoyed, Marcela turned her attention to the other side of the room, where she noticed a skinny, dark-haired boy scribbling something in a large book at the bar. *A book*. Who came to the bar to read a book? His lips turned down as he worked, oblivious to the music and surrounding noise. He seemed so serious and concentrated. Marcela liked him instantly.

After a few drinks and a significant amount of teasing from Ana, Marcela had at last worked up the nerve to join him by the bar and start a conversation. As it turned out, Daniel was

not nearly so serious as he had seemed from across the room. With a playful smile, he asked if she wanted to see his drawings. He had not been reading the book at all, but had instead been doodling over the text, creating a series of comics, jewelry designs, and sketches of people in the bar. They talked for hours about Daniel's love of design—he was planning on majoring in *diseño industrial*, Marcela's love of music, and the new socialist group Daniel had joined until eventually Daniel asked with flushed cheeks if Marcela would like to accompany him to a nearby *boliche*.

They danced until the music died down around six in the morning and the security guards kicked the stragglers to the streets. This ritual of leaving the stink of the club was always Marcela's favorite moment of those evenings. It was a magical time of day—that instant just before dawn, when the stars had disappeared but the sun was still only a sliver on the horizon, barely visible above the skyscrapers. The whole of the sky was hazy and purple and untouched—a perfect blank slate.

In the months and years that followed, Marcela and Daniel would share many more mornings like this. Together they would wander through the cobblestone streets of San Telmo, still half-drunk on *vino* and *cerveza* and high on the music of drum shows and *milonga* bands. The newspaper men would be opening their stands and the vegetable boys would whistle at Marcela as they passed. Daniel would yell at those *boludos* not to mess with his girl and Marcela secretly loved the spark of defense in his eyes when he got angry, the way his face would come alive like a still photograph transformed into a movie.

Those days were not so far away in the past. It had only been 6 years since they finished university—6 years since Daniel had gotten down on one knee and asked to marry her. But as Marcela stayed up waiting for Daniel to return, they seemed distant somehow, and Marcela felt

notably older. Marriage and the birth of her daughter had irrevocably separated her from those mornings of drunken spontaneity. She wondered if motherhood and domestic life had made her boring, if she had lost the glimmer of excitement that had drawn Daniel to her in the first place.

In the early hours of the evening, Daniel at last returned home to find Marcela sitting on the couch, eyes heavy, hands curled around a cold cup of tea. He lay down next to her and stretched his body across the length of the cushions, letting his head fall into Marcela's lap.

"I love you so much, *mi amor*," he had said, his voice infused with a tenderness that surprised Marcela. "You have no idea how much." And as he leaned up to kiss her, Marcela wanted nothing more than to believe him. But when their lips separated, the taste of tobacco and stale beer lingered between them. Marcela tried to determine if there was any other scent clinging to his skin—an unfamiliar perfume, a shampoo different from his own. She couldn't tell.

In a hushed voice, Daniel began to explain his absence. As he talked, Daniel played with the chain necklace he always wore—a silver *chai*, the Hebrew word for life. A little blue gem was set on the *yud*, the smaller of the two letters that made up the word. He had made the necklace himself when he first got interested in jewelry design. Playing with the charm was a nervous habit, and Marcela noted how his hands trembled slightly.

He told her about the discussion groups Pablo was organizing, and their planning for an underground newspaper. Pablo wanted it to be a collaborative effort between trade unions, left-wing parties, and student groups—an opportunity for all political minorities to get their voice out in the public sphere, in a medium that was free from government censorship.

Marcela didn't like the idea of it. Charming as he was, it was unlikely that Pablo would be able to get the sort of political collaboration between rival minorities that he envisioned. And

the government was still new, and new governments were always steeped in uncertainty. What if things turned violent? What if the newspaper put them in harm's way? There were too many what-ifs, and not nearly enough benefits.

Daniel didn't try to deny it. He told her about the feeling he'd had ever since the coup, like someone was always following him. "But I know it's all in my head," he said. "It's got to be."

"All the more reason not to get involved," Marcela insisted. "You know I care for Pablo as much as you do, but he can get a bit carried away sometimes. Remember when he nearly had you arrested at that demonstration against cutting funding for professors at the *UBA* campus?"

But his own part would be minimal, Daniel assured her. "Just coordinating the layout and distribution, I won't even be writing any of the articles. It's a risk maybe, but a small one. A necessary one. I have to do *something*, don't I? Things don't just change on their own, and I want my daughter to grow up in a country where she has the freedom and the security to be whatever she wants to be, and think whatever she wants to think. Don't you?"

And how could Marcela argue with a thing like that.

"I'll never keep you out of the loop again," Daniel promised. "If I go out I will always call you first. And I will always, always come home."

He would always come home. Marcela decided to believe him. She had to believe him. But even as she accepted this, she felt within herself an inevitable concession had been made. Although she knew Daniel's explanation about Pablo and the newspaper was too detailed—and too typical of Pablo—to be fabricated, Marcela remained skeptical. The idea of an affair, however far-fetched, had slipped its way into her mind and refused to get out. In the months that

followed, there were more absences, and fewer explanations. There were more fights, and fewer moments of understanding. But Daniel did keep his promise. He always came home.

Miami, Florida—April 2011

There was another rule that played a significant role in the Stepensky household. This was the Unmentionable Words rule. Nico had learned from a young age that there were certain phrases and subjects that were not appropriate for conversation at any time, regardless of circumstance: kidnapping, murder, Mel Gibson, military officials, Isaac's receding hairline...the list went on and on. Cecilia was always pushing boundaries with forbidden words, but Nico tried to avoid them whenever possible. He wasn't sure why his parents were so sensitive to certain subjects, but he felt it was easier to just accept the rules rather than fight against them. The problem was, Nico was never entirely sure what exactly qualified a word for the unmentionable list in the first place. "I'm so happy I could die" was okay, for example, but "I wanted to kill her" was not. Finding the right thing to say was required a certain balance, and Nico never seemed quite able to master it.

There was one word in particular that held more weight than the rest. And that was *La Bobe*. This word had been expressly banned ever since Nico's maternal grandmother had moved away from Miami seven years earlier. Before then, she had lived in a nearby apartment and had come over regularly for dinner or to babysit so Isaac and Luz could slip away for a night out. She was a small woman with a commanding presence; Nico could remember playing tag with Cecilia while she carried on heated conversations and debates with his parents at the dinner table. He had gotten the feeling they argued a lot, but as a little boy he didn't pay very much attention to it.

Nico and Ceci never dared to misbehave when Bobe was in charge. If they started fighting or refused to get ready for bed she would pull her index finger to her eye and in a warning tone—more firm than angry—would say “*ojo, niños.*” Sometimes she didn’t need to say anything at all. Just the sight of the finger pointed at her eye was enough. An *ojo* from Bobe could make even Ceci go quiet.

But there had been a warmth to her also. Nico had a vague recollection of standing on a chair, watching as she spread *dulce de leche* across a slightly burned slice of bread. She would let him lick the caramel off of the spoon, would smile and say, “*algo más, mi amor?*”

She had left suddenly, or so it seemed to Nico. Although he was only six at the time, he could still remember the day La Bobe had come to the house to say goodbye. Nico had watched from the front window as La Bobe pulled up to the driveway in a large moving van. Isaac had let her in and kissed her on the cheek in an awkward, halted sort of way and had told Nico and Ceci to sit down in the living room. Isaac had paced back and forth in the room, pausing only to wipe his glasses. La Bobe, for her part, sat down at the piano bench and began to twirl her hair. Her eyes were puffy around the corners, as if she had just been crying. At six years old, it had never occurred to Nico before that day that adults could cry; and the sight of Bobe’s eyes, glossy and red, had alarmed him.

La Bobe took a deep breath. “*Mis divinos.* I’ve come to say goodbye.”

“Goodbye?! You just got here!” protested Cecilia. “Aren’t you staying for dinner?”

La Bobe shot a questioning glance at Isaac. “You mean you didn’t tell them anything?”

Isaac, who was suddenly transfixed by an invisible spec of dust on his glasses, took his time looking up. “Er, Luz thought it might be...prudent...if you told them yourself.”

"Prudent. *Really*. And you and Luz are suddenly experts on prudent decisions? *Que nervio tenés.*"

La Bobe glared at her son-in-law in a way Nico had never seen before, her somber eyes flashing from sadness to a pointed anger in the course of a millisecond. Isaac, normally so chipper, bit his lip, taken aback.

But when La Bobe turned back to face her two grandchildren, the glare was gone, replaced instead by a steady mask of calm.

"Chicos, I have something very important to tell you," she said. "I am moving away from Miami, and I'm not sure when I'll be back."

"Why?" Nico asked.

"Because I have to."

"But *why*?" Even as a nine-year-old, Cecilia had been unrelenting in her questions.

"*Ojo*, Ceci." La Bobe lifted a finger to her eye. "I've gotten into a...disagreement with your madre. And she—*we*," she corrected after a glance at Isaac, "have decided it would be better if I spent some time away from the family."

"Can't you just say you're sorry?" Nico remembered asking. Apologies had been a big topic in first-grade that year.

"It's a little more complicated than that," said La Bobe. "This was a very big disagreement." She gave what must have been meant as a reassuring smile, but something was off about it. Her teeth didn't show, and her thin lips stretched unnaturally tight across her face.

"Don't you want to see us anymore?" Nico asked.

"Ay, *mi amor*. Of course I do. I love you both very much, more than anything. But sometimes, even when you love someone very much, you need to leave them for a while. When you're older you'll understand this."

Cecilia had nodded as if she understood perfectly already. Isaac continued pacing as if he were discovering how to walk for the first time. And Nico just swung his legs on the couch, confused.

And that had been it. With a near-suffocating hug and a sloppy kiss on each of their cheeks, La Bobe had walked out the front door and driven out of their lives in an orange and white moving truck. By the following week, Luz had packed away all of the pictures of her mother in the house, and piled them in some forgotten corner of the attic. Nico and Ceci had asked questions occasionally over the next couple of years—Was Bobe back yet? Were she and mamá still angry at each other? But whenever they mentioned La Bobe, Luz's face would go sour, and their inquiries were met with vague and cursory answers. As time passed with no new developments or news of La Bobe, the questions had eventually stopped altogether.

One night late spring, Nico lay in bed staring at the ceiling, unable to sleep. In the morning, he planned to ask Molly, the pretty girl from his math class, to the Eighth Grade Spring Dance. He had gone to bed early in hopes of making himself relax. However, instead of drifting off into a fortifying, bravery-inducing slumber, Nico found himself wide-awake, thinking about Molly's freckles and the long strawberry hair she twisted into a messy bun on top of her head. Did she like him? he wondered. She must like him at least a little, Nico decided, because she always smiled at him when they passed in the hallway, and the other day she had offered to exchange algebra notes with him before the test. But did she *like* him-like him?

In the adjacent room, Nico's parents were watching *telenovelas* in bed, an evening ritual they had held for as long as Nico could remember. Nico had no idea what they found so compelling about the Argentine soap operas. He couldn't stand the fake tears and dramatic music and endless twist of backstabbing and revelations and affairs, but his parents were addicted. "It's relaxing," Luz had told him once. "When I watch, my own life feels so much more simple."

Nico was in the middle of analyzing all the potential outcomes of asking Molly to the dance (what if she laughed at him? Or what if she said maybe? Nico knew girls often said maybe when they really meant no, or at least that's what Ceci said to the strings of boys who asked her on dates) for what must have been the millionth time in a row when he was distracted by his parents' conversation.

He didn't mean to eavesdrop, not really. But his name reached his ears in the inevitable way names have of finding their way back to their owners. Nico pressed his ear against the wall, straining to make out the string of Spanish and English from his parents' room.

"He's much too young to date," Luz declared in a tone that implied simple fact rather than opinion. It was the same tone she might have used to say something as obvious as "it's too cold to go swimming" or "it's too early for supper."

"Nico's fourteen, Luz," said Isaac. "It's a dance, not a wedding." And then, with a chuckle he added: "besides, you don't even know if she'll say yes."

On the other side of the wall, Nico winced. What if she didn't say yes?

"At any rate," Isaac continued. "Ceci dates. Can't have different rules for different kids."

"That's completely different," said Luz. "Cecilia is seventeen. And we both know I'd be much happier if *she* didn't date either."

There was another pause. Silently, Nico cursed Ceci and her big mouth. He hadn't planned on telling anyone about his plans for the dance, but his older sister had weaseled the information out of him. And now, thanks to Cecilia's teasing, the whole family knew about his romantic situation. Wonderful.

"Anyway," said Luz. "I don't really want to discuss this right now. Something else happened today." Her voice had grown so soft that Nico had to strain in order to hear. "I got a call today from a doctor."

"Was it the dentist about that nurse's finger I accidentally bit when they were doing x-rays last week? Because I already told them I was sorry about that..."

"No, it wasn't the dentist. It was a neurologist. And it was about my mother."

Nico was sure he must have heard wrong. He tried to think of the last time Luz had mentioned his grandmother aloud, but couldn't. Apparently, Isaac thought he had misheard as well. "*What?*" he boomed, and Nico heard the distinct snap of the remote turning off the TV. "Your mother has a neurologist? Your mother's neurologist contacted *you*? Does she even have your number anymo—"

"She was walking around town in her pajamas," Luz interrupted. "She went into the post office and demanded to see my dad. My *dad*, Isaac. She thought he was imprisoned in the mailroom and kept yelling at the clerks to let him out. The sheriff had to escort her to the hospital."

"*Dios*," said Isaac. "Is she crazy now?"

"Was she ever not?" Luz countered. "The neurologist said he needs to run some more tests before he can make an official diagnosis. He was asking me all these questions about

medical history, problems in the family. I didn't know what to say. She talked a lot about us, apparently. Kept telling him to call Miami."

Luz hesitated. "Maybe I was wrong not to try to make up," she whispered. "Maybe I was too hard on her. That's what she always said—that I didn't understand the sacrifices she made, that I had been too young to know the whole story. Isaac, what if she's this way because of me?"

"No," assured Isaac, "you can't blame yourself." Nico recognized the confidence in his voice; it was the same tone he would use with Nico after he missed a soccer goal or failed a math quiz. It was the you-tried-your-hardest, it's-the-thought-that-counts voice. Well meaning, but inauthentic. "You did what you had to do," said Isaac. "What was best for our family. If she *is* crazy, it's not because of you."

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His parents' conversation stuck with Nico in the weeks that followed, even after he had asked Molly to the dance—she had said yes after all!—and they had spent the night dancing to Rihanna and Jay Z in their middle school's darkened gym, the basketball hoops smothered with wilting streamers. (He had even considered kissing her when at the end of the night they sat on the curb and with a shy smile Molly slipped a freckled hand into his. But Nico had chickened out at the last minute, missing his opportunity when his mother's purple minivan arrived to take him home.) Even with the recent memory of Molly's hand in his own to occupy his thoughts, Nico still couldn't get the image of La Bobe at the post office out of his head.

Was La Bobe really crazy? She had been absent from Nico's life for so long that without even realizing it, he had come to accept as fact that she was never coming back. He could no longer remember how tall she was or whether that mole on her face was on the right side or left. But every once in a while something would jar one of Nico's memories—the smell of pine soap,

an open jar of dulce de leche. And then there were the bracelets. Nico could never shake the image of those silver hoops looping around his grandmother's pale wrists.

And Luz had said something about her father. Nico knew very little about his *abuelo* on his mom's side, other than that his mother and grandmother had immigrated to the States without him. Luz never talked about him, and Nico had always assumed that she didn't remember much, that there was nothing to say. But why would La Bobe expect to find her husband in some postal office somewhere? *She talked a lot about us.* That was what Nico's mother had said. But was Luz ready to talk about her too after all this time?

Buenos Aires, Argentina—Mayo 1977

It was an unusually bright Wednesday afternoon in early May, and Daniel sat on a bench in the middle of the Plaza de Mayo, waiting for Pablo to arrive. Daniel looked across the square to where a line of soldiers stood guard at *La Casa Rosada*, the huge pink building that housed the government's executive offices. He looked away quickly. He knew this plaza wasn't exactly the safest place to be, not these days. Still, Daniel couldn't resist coming back there. He liked the feel of the plaza—the way the majestic government buildings framed the center square, the way the plaza opened up into the sky like a hole in the city—the eye of the storm. Here in the plaza he felt secure in his anonymity, certain that no one could single him out among the crowd. He was in the center of the city, the center of the world.

This area had a different atmosphere than the rest of the city's neighborhoods. It was more European than colorful La Boca, busier than quaint Palermo Soho, more exciting than his new home in the quiet northern neighborhood of Belgrano. The late-afternoon sun peaked out from behind the skyscrapers, summer still hanging on through the flicker of its rays, but there

was a slight chill in the air that caught Daniel off guard. Autumn in Buenos Aires sneaks up on you, coming out only in certain hours and moments.

As he waited for Pablo, Daniel played with his necklace, letting his thumb pads trace the familiar curve of the silver. He thought about Marcela waiting at home. At this very moment she was probably finishing up the last of her piano lessons. She had been in especially high spirits ever since *Pesaj* a month ago, and Daniel was glad he had conceded to hosting the event. Marcela was right—he was being paranoid, and he hadn't been spending enough time with them lately. But maybe now things were finally going back to normal, back to how they had been before the coup and before the awkward silences that now plagued their apartment.

Pablo snuck up behind him, startling Daniel with a nudge in the side. Daniel jumped.

"*Boludo!*" he yelled at Pablo, *you asshole*, but he was already breaking into a smile, mischief spreading across his scruffy face.

"Lighten up, Susterman," said Pablo. He was a year older than Daniel, short but with a strong athletic build and an arrogance that made him seem taller. "Just thought it would be funny to give you a scare, *che*." But then Pablo paused a second, perhaps realizing that the situation was not so funny after all. As quickly as it had come, the mischief was gone again.

"You should watch your back better anyway," said Pablo. He lowered his voice slightly. "Did you hear Martín is missing? He didn't come home from work last Friday, and no one's seen him since. Lilian is frantic." Martín was another friend from university. The three used to all play pickup games of fútbol together every Saturday, and then go out and drink *cerveza* until they were red faced and stupid.

Daniel's brow creased and for a second his face transformed, the boyishness in it disappearing into the wrinkles of his forehead. "You think it means something?"

Pablo shrugged. It was a carefully practiced shrug, designed to portray a sense of confidence that he didn't necessarily possess. "It means nothing good."

The two paused to look around the plaza. It was fairly busy for the time of day, but everyone walked along more quietly than they might have in past years. Balding businessmen still strode across in confident steps, full of flared collars and skinny ties, lugging around brown leather briefcases with an air of self-importance. A few tourists wandered, pausing to take photographs of the church and *La Casa Rosada*. Its second floor balcony looked out impressively over the plaza, the famous balcony of Perón's booming announcements, of Evita's speeches. Today, however, the balcony was deserted, and its silence extended over the entire plaza. There were no massive crowds these days, no union strikes or political campaigns. The soldiers stationed by the coral walls stared impassively at the crowd.

Behind the soldiers, the huge Argentine flag waved, proudly displaying its stripes of pale blue. In the center of the flag, a yellow sun smirked out at the crowd.

The only disruption among the hushed whispers of the square was a small group of women standing in one corner of the plaza. They all had white scarves on their heads, and they formed a defiant line facing the soldiers. It was like two frontlines of an epic battle, except for one army was composed of middle-aged women. A few of them unrolled a banner that read, "Where are our children?" *Bring them back*, they chanted, *bring them back alive*. Daniel thought of his own mother in Mendoza, of her shrill voice on the phone whenever she called to make sure he had been remembering to get enough sleep and eat right. Mothers were indeed a force to be reckoned with.

Daniel shivered. "*Che*, It's getting colder isn't it."

Pablo followed Daniel's gaze to the group of women, but said nothing.

"Anyway, do you have a delivery for me?" They had a system worked out by now. Pablo handled all the editing of the paper, delegating articles to friends in various social and political circles. They tried to publish a new issue every month, or whenever they could pool enough money to cover the costs of the *fotocopiadora*. Daniel dealt more with the logistics side of things—delivery and distribution.

The articles were not entirely political. Daniel had been the one to push for a more holistic approach. If they were going to make a newspaper, he argued, it ought to include *all* the subjects they didn't get from government-sponsored sources, not just politics. And so the newspaper now also included music reviews, announcements of art exhibits by more left-leaning artists who had been denounced by the administration, and reports about international affairs that the government tried to play down—especially the growing tension with Great Britain surrounding ownership of the *Islas Malvinas*. There was also a comics page, which was the only section of the paper that Daniel regularly contributed content to. And more recently, they had started a new section—a missing persons list, where people could add names and brief descriptions of their absent loved ones. The list kept growing longer and longer, and Pablo had started making the font smaller to allow for more names to fit.

Appearance-wise, the newspapers weren't much to look at, just a stack of black and white photocopied papers folded over and stapled down the middle. They never made a lot of copies either—200 at most per issue. Quality over quantity, Pablo insisted. He said the ultimate goal was to slip under the radar, to crawl on the *junta*'s back like a poisonous spider, unnoticed until the moment of the bite. "Better to have a subtle impact that works than a glaring one that doesn't," he said. It was a delicate balance to achieve. Too many copies, and they were at risk of exposure. Too few, and no one would notice them at all.

"Yup, I've got the latest edition ready to go." Pablo cast a look over at the soldiers and grimaced. "Best not take them out here though. Those *hijos de puta* are always watching everything. Why'd you have us meet down here anyway? Only the most public place in the whole damned city."

Daniel didn't know. In retrospect, it did seem stupid to come here. An unnecessary risk. His mind flashed again to the Belgrano apartment, to Marcela waiting on the other end of the *subte* line. She was always getting on his case about unnecessary risks, ever since the coup. Everything he did, it seemed, was wrong and verging on stupid. But how could he explain to either Marcela or Pablo about the draw of the plaza, about the feeling of being centered? There was a strange comfort of being in the heart of the city, of feeling its pulse. But Daniel didn't know how to say these things aloud so instead he just shrugged and followed Pablo to a nearby alley a block away, where Pablo handed over about 75 copies of the paper.

They agreed to meet up for coffee the following week. Daniel kissed Pablo's cheek and patted him on the back, then doubled back toward the *subte*. As he headed down the stairs into the D line station, a green circular sign marking its entrance, he picked up his pace a bit. It was starting to get late, nearly rush hour, and soon bodies would begin to squeeze into the cars, filling them up with the familiar, suffocating mix of sweat and perfume. It was at this time of day that pickpockets slid easily through the cars, slitting bags and pulling wallets of the unaware or careless strangers, and street sellers work tirelessly, placing coloring books or sunglasses on the knees of passengers, hoping to receive a few pesos when they came back around.

As he walked down the stairs, Daniel passed a homeless woman with an infant in her arms. "A *peso* for my baby?" she asked hopefully. "Just one *pesito* to help me buy food for my child, *por favor*."

Daniel walked past the woman without stopping, a tinge of guilt creeping up his throat as he passed and her gaze moved on, calling out to the person walking behind him. But he was thinking of his own daughter on the other end of the subway line. It had been a long day and he knew he needed to get back, back to his daughter, back to Marcela, back to her crazy curls the color of cinnamon, back to the *mate* she would surely have ready along with an afternoon snack of *pan tostada* and *dulce de leche*.

The station was already crowded. Daniel stopped for a moment to buy a copy of *Clarín*. Ever since joining Pablo's newspaper venture, he had become quasi-obsessed with keeping up with the news. The headlines said something about tensions in Moscow, fire bombings in Italy. There was an op-ed about how the government was making progress in the economy, drastically reducing inflation. Daniel read it, irritated. Progress and more progress. Progress seemed to be the *junta*'s favorite word, but Daniel had seen nothing but a progression of fear since the coup.

Daniel looked up and swallowed hard. It seemed that in the mere minutes it had taken him to purchase the newspaper and skim the headlines, the amount of people on the platform had doubled. He felt claustrophobic already, but knew that the train would be even worse. He leaned down behind the newsstand and opened his messenger bag to slide the *Clarín* inside.

As he pulled open the flap, Daniel stared down at the cluster of papers Pablo had given him only a short while earlier. He had planned to distribute them closer to the Palermo district, dropping a few off discretely in each of the cafes that lined *La Plaza Italia*. But wouldn't it make more sense to leave some here? *Subte* stations got more traffic than cafés anyway. Daniel glanced around—near him stood a young mother with a stroller, a teenage couple with clasped hands, the newspaper salesman who was busy restocking some of the magazines. None of them was paying the slightest bit of attention to him. Daniel thought how easy it would be to take

some of the papers and place them on the magazine rack, and then move to the front and catch the next train. He pulled out a handful of the newspapers and closed the flap of his bag.

Just then, there was a commotion on the other end of the platform. Daniel looked up and noticed three soldiers walking toward him from the other side of the platform, boots banging heavily on the floor. The soldiers moved in one cohesive unit, and the other train passengers shied away from them as they passed, until it seemed to Daniel that a narrow hallway was opening up among the crowd, the soldiers on one end, himself on the other. The three *militares* didn't say anything, didn't raise their guns. Their actions didn't indicate anything more than a casual parole of the station, but Daniel's pulse sped up all the same. He met the eye of one of them for a split second, and panic bubbled, volcanic beneath his skin.

Without really being conscious of it, Daniel felt the newspapers slip from his hand. For a moment he watched them float slowly to the floor like feathers falling from a shot bird. Then, with a start, Daniel began to run toward the exit on the opposite side of the platform, pushing people out of the way as he went.

It took just 20 seconds for the *militares* to catch up with him. He tried to fight back but with a three-to-one ratio he didn't stand a chance. Daniel thought of Martín not coming home last Friday, of Pablo with his radical ideas, of Marcela waiting in the apartment. He thought of their beautiful little girl, with cinnamon curls like her mother. He shouted out his name and phone number, over and over and over, in the hopes that someone would call Marcela, would let her know what had happened.

"Daniel Susterman! 42175832! Daniel Susterman! 42175832! Daniel Susterman!
42175832! Daniel---- Daniel!"

The rest of his shouts were drowned out by the approaching train.

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The call came at 10:53 pm, over 5 hours after Daniel was supposed to come home.

Marcela remembered the time because at the exact moment of the call, she was sitting at the kitchen table, staring at the little clock over the stovetop. It was an outdated appliance—she and Daniel couldn't afford the newer models with timers and a broiler option—and the burners were rusted from too many years of over-boiled water drizzling down onto artificial blue flames. The clock above it was old-fashioned as well, with numbers that rotated up with the turn of each minute and hour on a perpetual conveyer belt, like a number-coded lock clicking into place.

Dinner, a homemade *torta de calabaza* and a frozen meatloaf Marcela had purchased at the *mercado* down the block, sat uneaten on the counter. She hadn't had the energy to put her daughter to bed even, so instead the five-year-old was playing on the kitchen floor, pulling a baby doll around in a wooden truck, oblivious to her mother's too-straight posture, to the tapping of her fingertips on the wooden tabletop.

As she stared at the clock, Marcela ran through all the possibilities she could think of to explain Daniel's lateness. *The subte probably broke down again, she told herself. He went out for coffee with Pablo. His work buddies invited him over for dinner. He stopped at a locutorio, but didn't have enough coins on him for the call to go through.* She cycled through the reasons again and again, reconfiguring them, willing them to be true. But behind all the possible explanations emerged a desperate, irrational panic that threatened to overwhelm her. *He promised he'd always call. Why wouldn't he call?*

These thoughts raced through Marcela's head at an unnaturally fast pace, over and over, doing cartwheels in her brain, until they were interrupted by the phone. Marcela grabbed at it, answering on the first ring.

“Hello?” She said, too quickly. She glanced at the clock, watching the 2 on the right roll down to reveal a 3 below. 22:53. The number would stick with her for years to come. She would develop a strange aversion to odd numbers, to dates that ended in threes. It would become the antithesis of 11:11, the unlucky time she hoped never to catch.

“Is this the home of Daniel Susterman?” The nasally voice on the other end of the line sounded like it could have belonged to a middle-aged woman. It was shaky and uncertain, and most importantly, it wasn’t Daniel’s.

“Who’s calling?” Marcela’s own voice betrayed her disappointment, coming out sharper and higher-pitched than she intended.

“*Por dios*, don’t ask me that, señora,” said the woman. Marcela wrapped the chord of the phone around her fingers. “I don’t know anything. I’m just trying to help so don’t ask me that.”

Marcela felt a chill up her spine, unfamiliar, uninvited. She glanced over at her daughter, who had stopped playing with her truck, and was now staring up at her mother, the doll cradled in her arms.

“Yes,” she said. “This is the home of Daniel Susterman.”

“They...they took him. At the *Catedral* station. Right in front of everyone, they took him.”

Marcela’s heart felt as if it were being pulled out of her chest, a thousand invisible hands grabbing at it, pressing into its chambers and arteries. She couldn’t breathe.

“Who took him? What are you talking about?”

“*Los militares*. He shouted this number when they did. And so I called. I kept thinking about my son, he’s about the same age. I kept thinking about how if it was...if it was him, god forbid, I’d want to know...”

"Where did they take—"

"I'm sorry señora, I don't want any trouble."

"Please just—"

"I'm sorry."

The anonymous caller hung up, and the phone line went dead. The minute spot on the clock moved again, the digits shifting to read 22:54. Marcela fell back into the kitchen chair, where she stayed for a long time after, letting the wood press against her back and watching the minutes of the clock move again and again.

Miami, Florida—May 2011

"I officially call this meeting of the Stepenskys to order!" Isaac declared as the grandfather clock in the living room struck three. He opened the blinds, allowing the afternoon sunlight to sweep into the living room. It was early May, and although summer had not yet officially arrived, its heat certainly had. Miami sweltered under the heaviness of smog from the city and salt gusts from the shore.

Family meetings were Isaac's favorite activity, and his solution to any and all potential causes of tension in the Stepensky household. In general, the meetings tended to fall into two categories. The first was a real meeting, or a *meeting-meeting* as Nico liked to call it, in which an actual point of contention was put up for debate among the family and subsequently voted upon. Past meeting-meetings had varied widely in topic, from where to go on vacation to whether or not Nico could keep Peggy. The answer to that question, thankfully, had been a unanimous yes (as a general rule, Cecilia opposed any and all motions that Nico was in favor of, but she had

made an exception in order to “provide a home for an innocent victim of pervasive animal cruelty”).

The second and by far more common type of meeting was the *lecture-meeting*, in which Nico and Cecilia were expected to listen to their parents expound on some topic while providing little to no feedback of their own. Of this latter type of meeting, Cecilia was always the primary intended audience, since she was the usual culprit of whatever incident had created the necessity of a lecture in the first place. But Nico was required to listen as well, under the general assumption that within a year or so he too might attempt to sneak out at 3 AM or to chain himself to a palm tree in the local park. Nico was still angry from the most recent lecture-meeting, which had been called to order after Cecilia had been caught google-ing Miami tattoo parlors that would ink minors. The result was a nearly 2-hour discussion of the Official Stepensky Tattoo Policy, with references from Maimonides, the Bible, Tom Hanks, George Washington, and others to illustrate the point and drive home the severity of the issue.

No matter what the content of the meetings, they always followed the same basic pattern. Isaac would pace back and forth in front of the piano as he talked, letting his fingers trail silently across the ivory and black keys, composing an opera only he could hear. But whenever Isaac wanted to emphasize a particular point or bring order to the room, he would slam down a third interval dramatically, letting the echo of the keys ricochet across the room.

Luz would sit in the big purple armchair, cutting out coupons from the morning paper or carefully crocheting a blanket or scarf. She always had a look of intense concentration on whatever task was at hand, and yet she never failed to insert her opinion when needed, perfectly aware of the conversation around her. Nico had always admired this talent, this ability to be completely engaged in two things at the same time.

Nico and Cecilia's spot was on the brown leather couch by the windows. Nico always sat on the left, Cecilia on the right. Peggy, when she chose to make an appearance, would curl up between them, hiding her stump of a front leg with the other three. There was a structure to these meetings that was comforting to Nico. Like the family rules, the meetings had a sort of permanence to them.

On this particular occasion, however, Nico could immediately tell something was different. To start with, his mother was not clipping coupons or crocheting or even writing out grocery lists. Rather, Luz was sitting cross-legged in the armchair, her long arms folded elegantly over her knees. The effect made her look younger somehow, and more serene, like a Buddhist monk deep in meditation. But her dark eyes betrayed her calm posture; they darted back and forth from Isaac to Nico and Ceci then back to Isaac again.

"Your mother and I have talked," Isaac began. He sat on the piano bench and removed his glasses, leaning forward to wipe the frames on his shirt. This too was a telling sign, indicating a third, much rarer type of family meeting, the *bad news-meeting*. There were only two other occasions in which Nico could recall his father cleaning his glasses as he spoke. One of those times had been when he was 10 and Cecilia was 13, and Isaac had told them that Avalon, their newly adopted kitten, had been hit by a car and passed away. The other was the day that Bobe left.

Nico looked over to Cecilia to see if she too sensed an imminent bad-news meeting. He hadn't told her about the conversation he had overheard weeks before for fear that word would get back to his parents that he was eavesdropping. Ever since Cecilia had blabbed about the school dance, he had decided she was an untrustworthy person to confide in. But even without knowing about La Bobe, she must have noticed the warning signs. Ceci, however, wasn't paying

attention to anything at all. She was tapping her foot idly, staring out the window at the pool.

With sudden understanding, Nico saw that her iPod buds were plugged in her ears.

“Ceci....AHEM...Cecilia!” Isaac had noticed the ear buds as well. There was no answer.

Nico leaned across Peggy to poke Cecilia in the arm, and she jumped.

“*What* was that for?” she snapped, pulling out her left earphone. She then looked across at Isaac, who was frowning.

“This is important, Cecilia. Pay attention.”

“Oh.” Unapologetic, she rolled her eyes slightly, but she did not replace the left bud in her ear. Isaac took this as a good enough sign to continue.

“As I was saying, your mother and I have talked...” Isaac glanced at Luz, who was leaning so far forward in her chair that Nico was afraid she might fall out. “And we’ve decided that the family will be spending the summer in Oakersville, Georgia!”

Isaac replaced his glasses on his face and held his hands out, waiting. He seemed to be expecting a big reaction, as if his announcement ought to hold the same appreciation as if he had said “we are going on a cruise to the Bahamas” or “we’re going to The Wizarding World of Harry Potter.” But Cecilia and Nico’s faces remained blank.

“Uh...where?” Nico asked.

“Oakersville,” Isaac repeated. “Oakersville, Georgia, which according to Wikipedia is home to some of the most fascinating wildlife in the Southeast as well as some mean grits and waffles. Also,” he added, “home to your Bobe.”

At this, Isaac glanced over at Luz. She ran a hand through her curly hair, which had taken on a static quality in the afternoon heat.

"We're going to see *Bobe*?" Cecilia's jaw was dropped open so wide that it was surprising she managed to speak at all.

"Bobe's in *Oakersville*?" Nico added. The announcement came as a disappointment. His parents had never told him where Bobe had gone—he wasn't sure if they had even known themselves for a while—but he had always imagined her off in some exotic location. The Italian coast, maybe, or on a long-term safari deep in the jungles of Africa.

"We'll be renting a cabin right outside the town," said Luz with a forced casualness. "Your father and I both agree that it's time we paid your grandmother a visit. It's been too long, and it will be good for you to spend some time with her."

Cecilia wasn't having any of it. "Are you *kidding*?" she asked. Nico recognized a familiar spark in her voice that often accompanied her many tirades.

"We're going to just pack up and leave for the middle-of-fucking-nowhere Georgia so we can reunite with a woman who hasn't even thought to send us a birthday card in the last eight years? Is this some sort of sick joke?"

"Watch your language," Luz snapped. "And be careful how you talk about your grandmother."

"Not like *you* talk about her at all," Cecilia countered. She was getting more worked up by the minute. "And you know I'm right. We haven't seen her since I was like 10, and she obviously hasn't been much inclined to keep in touch. Incidentally, I have my own summer plans, and they do *not* involve some sketch cabin in Oakersville."

Cecilia turned to Nico for support, but he had none to offer. He was unwilling to pick sides so readily. Molly had started waiting for him after math class every day, and the idea of leaving for the whole summer when something was just beginning was super frustrating. But

then, Nico thought again of the conversation he had overheard a few weeks earlier. He was curious about La Bobe. More than curious, really. He had this strange desire for her to see him now, to see how much he had grown in her absence. He wondered if she would be sorry she had missed it.

Seeing that Nico was an unreliable ally, Ceci continued her protests on her own. "You and Bobe don't even *like* each other! Isn't that why you made her leave in the first place?"

"I didn't *make* her leave, Cecilia."

"Well either way, she left, didn't she?" Ceci stood up and glared at her mother. "She left and she didn't come back. And it never seemed to bother you to visit before, so why bother now? You are uprooting a perfectly normal, well-adjusted family and placing us in the middle of a warzone of religious extremism and agricultural abuse. It's not fair. In fact, it's completely unethical. What is this family, a dictatorship?"

"*Order to the Stepenskys!*" exclaimed Isaac, and with a bang of E minor, the family once again descended into silence. Dictatorships, like La Bobe herself, were high on the family's list of unmentionable words. Startled by the sound of the piano, Cecilia fell back on the couch and sat on Peggy's tail. With an indignant yelp, Peggy jumped off the couch.

Luz looked suddenly exhausted, nauseous even. "She's sick, Cecilia. She's sick and she wants to see us. We are going to Oakersville for the summer whether you like it or not. So you may as well try to like it."

Buenos Aires, Argentina—Mayo 1977

Marcela thought she was going to be sick. In the hours after the phone call, nausea had swelled inside her, threatening to overpower her at any minute. She ought to have called the

police. Or maybe Zaydel. Or anyone really. But the call had paralyzed her somehow, and she found herself unable to do anything useful, but at the same time unable to do nothing at all. She paced the apartment in a daze. She packed the uneaten dinner in the fridge. She did the dishes. She went through the mail, stacking the bills first in alphabetical order, then by due date, then by category. She started to write a shopping list, then crossed it out, then started again. She had a desperate urge to keep her hands busy, as if with each flex of her fingers she could keep her body moving and her mind blank. At some point, she gathered enough energy to put her daughter to bed. She gathered up the toddler, who had fallen asleep on the floor next to her truck, and carried her to her room. The girl opened her eyes at the disruption and blinked for a second before settling back to sleep. Marcela worried how much she picked up on.

After kissing her daughter and closing the door behind her, Marcela did not enter her own bedroom. Without Daniel home, the room no longer felt like her own, and she had an inexplicable fear of being alone there. Instead, she settled for the floor, crawled in the small space between the couch and the piano, wedged her body like a book between the two pieces of furniture. Her limbs folded in on themselves and she felt suddenly small, the apartment a cavernous landscape, the world outside the front door ceasing to exist entirely.

She did not cry so much as shake. Her shoulders heaved up and down, and she gulped down oxygen as if it were at risk of running out. The tears, however, wouldn't come. She felt her body had dried up completely, that she was shriveling from the inside out. The minutes—or were they hours?—passed by in a slow roll. With each rise and fall of her shoulders Marcela willed time to reverse, willed Daniel to come through the door like he promised he would. She tried to stay awake. She wanted to be there, ready, when he came home. She wanted to yell at him for staying out so late. She wanted him to tell her she was possessive and paranoid and foolish for

getting so nervous. Anything. Anything to make this turning in her stomach stop. She waited and waited but the stubborn door remained closed.

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Far on the east side of the city, a small sedan sped along *Avenida Costanera* toward *Libertador*. The side windows were covered in black paper. This was to prevent people from looking in, not the other way around. There was no concern that the four passengers in the backseat of the car might look out, because they were all blindfolded and one boy, no older than 20, was unconscious from a blow to the head. They were all crammed together in the back, hips overlapping and elbows jutting into stomachs: the unconscious boy, a blonde girl of around 17, a slightly overweight man with a balding head and bushy eyebrows. Last in the line, with a shoulder wedged against the window, and a blindfold stretched uncomfortably tight across his face, sat Daniel.

None of the prisoners spoke or knew who else was in the backseat beside them. In the front of the car, two soldiers, a commanding officer and one of his infantry men, debated about who would win the upcoming *fútbol* match, River Plate or the Boca Juniors. "River's got Ortiz, there's no way they can lose!" insisted the younger soldier.

"But Boca always comes out on top," said his superior. "300 pesos says they win 3-2."

The younger soldier in the front seat cracked his window and spat. His saliva disappeared in the black rush of the passing wind. He glanced back at the prisoners for a moment and noted that the girl was rather pretty, despite the crying. But he quickly lost interest and turned back toward the front.

"300 pesos. You have a deal."

On the first day of June, the Stepenskys set out for Oakersville, leaving just before dawn in order to make the trip all in one day. It was not an easy journey. Isaac got lost twice, and when he accidentally set the GPS system route to Oakland, California instead of Oakersville, Luz nearly had a panic attack. She was a poor traveler. On plane rides, she refused to sit in the window seat or any seat in the back. On road trips, she constantly double-checked maps and listened to every traffic report on the radio, even when there was clearly no traffic. As Isaac drove deeper into rural territory, Luz fiddled with the radio, but all she could find were a handful of country stations and a Christian talk show called *102.5: The Fish*.

The air-conditioning broke when they reached the Florida-Georgia border, and as the June heat overtook the car, Cecilia broke into a tirade about global warming, oppression, and “the violent assault on the natural environment.” This continued for nearly an hour until Luz told Ceci that if she mentioned gas emissions one more time, Luz would personally see to it that upon their return Ceci would no longer be able to drive the family car to see Ray or her friends. After that, Ceci spent the rest of the trip glaring at the back of Luz’s head with the bass of her iPod cranked high.

Only Nico had little to say throughout the journey. He sat in the backseat with Peggy curled on his lap, watching the shifting landscape pass by in a blur of green and yellow. As the car made its way north on I-75, Nico kept wondering if maybe he should have followed Ceci’s lead rather than agreeing so easily to the trip. It would be weird to spend this summer—the last summer before high school—outside of Miami. What if in his absence Molly found someone she liked better? What if Jonny decided he was too old for fantasy games like *Oblivion* by the time Nico returned? Watching the cows and cotton fields roll by him, Nico had the odd sensation that

everything was changing too fast. As the smothering heat worsened, a bead of sweat formed just above his brow, and slowly slid down his temple over a swollen pimple. He felt dizzy. If someone were to take a CAT scan of his brain at that moment, Nico was sure the resulting image would resemble a melting popsicle.

Finally, as the sun began to set, the van passed a dusty road sign that read, "Oakerville, Georgia, population 823." But if a real town existed somewhere in the vicinity of the sign, it was not visible from the road. The two-lane highway stretched on in a seemingly endless straight line, and the sides of the road were just as rural and empty as they had been 50 miles earlier.

"Whelp, here we are! The great township of Oakerville!" announced Isaac as he maneuvered the car off the main road toward a smaller gravel path. "The air feels different over here, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, hotter than hell," muttered Cecilia.

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Nico woke early the next morning to Peggy licking his face and wagging her tail in excitement. Nico grumbled and tried to push her away, but it was a hopeless cause. She kept sniffing at his ear until at last Nico obliged her by sitting up. He blinked, letting the wooden ceiling fan above him come slowly into focus.

The "cabin" his parents had rented turned out to be a lot nicer than Nico was expecting. He had imagined roughing it in some decrepit shed with an outhouse and maybe some chickens running around the yard. Fortunately, the cabin was actually some sort of weird retreat house owned by a couple of hippies who rented it out to anyone who needed a space for "quiet reflection." Nico's room was small but two big windows stretched from the ceiling to the floor,

making it seem bigger. By the windows a small meditation area was set up, complete with incense and a yoga mat.

On the way down the hall, Nico peaked into Cecilia's room and was surprised to see that not only was she awake, but that she was already in the process of unpacking. Or, unpacking might have been a bit of an overstatement. Ceci had strewn her clothes all over the room, seemingly at random. It looked just like her room at home already. Currently, she was standing on her bed, in the process of trying to hang a tie-dyed tapestry across her ceiling with little success.

"Hey," said Nico, just as she reached up to tack the first corner of the tapestry into the white plaster. Distracted by Nico's voice, Ceci dropped the tack and the tapestry fell on top of her, turning her temporarily into a flailing tie-dye ghost.

"*SHIT*," she yelled from beneath the sheet, and Nico burst out laughing.

When Cecilia at last managed to disentangle herself from the tapestry, Nico said "morning!" brightly. Ceci gave him the finger.

"What do you think of the cabin?" Nico asked.

"Nice yoga mats, shitty location," said Ceci.

"But I bet when we see Bobe it will be less shitty, right?" said Nico. "Aren't you excited to see her?"

"You're *excited*?" asked Cecilia. "I'm dreading it. Anyone crazy enough to be hanging out here for the past seven years is too crazy for me."

With Peggy limping along behind, they both headed downstairs to the kitchen, where Isaac was busy preparing an elaborate breakfast of eggs and French toast. He must have gone

somewhere to buy food, although where was beyond Nico, as he had seen nothing to suggest there was enough civilization around to necessitate a grocery store.

“Morning, Nico-Lico! Morning Ceci!” Isaac shouted over the sizzle of the frying pan. “Would you like anything to drink?” he offered. “*Café con leche*? Tea? OJ? And before you ask Ceci, no it’s not organic.”

Ceci frowned in disapproval. “I’ll just have water then.”

“Where’s Ma?” Nico yawned.

“She went for a morning walk,” said Isaac as he tried to maneuver three plates of steaming food to the table. The plates wavered on his arms, and some eggs dropped to the floor, where Peggy was happy to take care of them. “Gotta clear her head. She’s having a bit of a rough time with this trip, you know.”

“*She’s* having a rough time?” asked Cecilia in disbelief. “She’s the one who made us come out here anyway! If it weren’t for her, I could be at the beach with Ray right now.”

“Believe it or not, Cecilia, this is hard for her too. Harder than you realize,” said Isaac, pushing a plate in front of her. “But sometimes we have to do things we don’t want to do, or go places we don’t necessarily have to go. That’s just life.”

“But if *none* of us want to be here, I don’t see why we need to,” grumbled Ceci.

“Pa?” asked Nico.

“Yes?”

Nico hesitated before he spoke, trying to choose his words carefully. There was a question he had been wondering about for a while, but he didn’t know how to ask it. He knew they were here in the first place to see Bobe, but it still felt weird to talk about her openly.

“Well, I was just wondering. Why did Bobe come out here anyway?”

"I dunno, son," Isaac responded. "Probably the same reason that the owners of this cabin did. Maybe she needed a quiet place to rejuvenate."

"I know, but..." Nico tried again. "I mean, what happened that made her leave Miami in the first place? When she said goodbye to us she said we'd understand when we're older. Well aren't we old enough yet?"

Isaac sighed and put down his fork. "Yes, you are both getting older, much as I try to deny it. I guess you deserve to know some things." He paused and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Do you know why your mother's family—and mine too—immigrated to the US?"

Nico and Cecilia looked at each other, but neither had an answer. He had never really thought about it, Nico realized. It had never mattered *why* his parents had come to the states, only that they *did*. It was like it had never mattered why Bobe had left, only that she was gone.

"Our families moved here because at the time Argentina was a dangerous place to be. There was a military government in power, and there was a lot of violence.

"I learned about that," said Ceci, in that self-inflated voice she used whenever she was about to flaunt her vast knowledge on all "important things" in the world. Nico resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "We learned about it in Spanish class. The Dirty War."

"Yes, some people call it that," said Isaac. "And it was dirty, what happened. But the name isn't entirely fitting. A war implies an enemy, you see. Wars can be justified, with two equally valid sides. But this wasn't like that. This was a war within the country itself, a war against Argentina's own people."

"And that's why you left," said Ceci. "Because of the political oppression."

“Because of the political oppression, yes. You could say that. But it was also because of the fear. It’s something that’s hard for you kids to understand, growing up here. You can’t imagine this kind of fear. People were kidnapped, and a lot of them were around your age, Ceci. And in the Jewish neighborhoods...well, let’s just say that we were harder hit than the rest of the population. I was only eight when I left Buenos Aires, but I still remember that fear, the way it hovered over my community. Once, I was walking down the street with my mother, and I saw a man being dragged from a *kiosco* at gunpoint. My mother pushed me to the side of the street as they passed and put her arms out so I couldn’t see around them. When I asked what happened after all she said was ‘Nothing. Nothing at all.’ It wasn’t something anyone ever talked about.”

Nico and Cecilia waited for Isaac to continue but he paused and closed his eyes. Nico wondered if in his mind’s eye he was in Buenos Aires, watching the man pulled from the shop all over again. He wondered what his own life would have been like if he had grown up with things like that rather than just with an annoying sister and a mother who freaked out when he didn’t follow the rules. Things could be a lot worse, he realized. Ceci no longer had that haughty look on her face. For once, she seemed to have nothing to say. She was perhaps realizing, as Nico was, that if she had lived in Argentina at the time, she would have been a prime target.

Finally, Nico broke the silence. “But that still doesn’t explain why you don’t get along with BoBe,” he said in a whisper. Why was he whispering? It was just the three of them.

“Well, your mother and La BoBe experienced this sort of violence in a, er, less abstract way.” There was something about the way Isaac said this that made Nico think there was more to the story. But Isaac pressed on. “And La BoBe, she had a hard time adjusting to the states when she and your mom got here. It’s easy when you’re children like me or your *madre* were, but with adults it’s a lot harder. A whole new language, a new culture. I think your BoBe never stopped

missing what she'd lost, if that makes sense. But everyone deals with loss differently. And as you know, *chicos*, I believe very strongly in the power of the future. Adapt and adjust, that's the only way. So your grandmother and our family had some...disagreements. Philosophical divergences, I guess you could say. And eventually it got to the point where we could no longer reconcile our differences. That's when your Bobe left Miami."

"So that's it?" Ceci sounded skeptical. "That's the reason after all this time? Bobe was still sad about everything in Buenos Aires and you guys were just over it?"

"Well, it's a little more complicated than that," Isaac allowed. He sounded tired. "But your mother really doesn't like it when I talk about it. Let's just say that your Bobe has a love affair with the past. But we are a family that moves forward."

Nico wanted to ask more, but Isaac took a long sip of his *café con leche* and pulled out his new iPad to check the weather. He tapped against the screen with a particular fervor, signifying that the discussion had come to a close.

Buenos Aires, Argentina—Mayo 1977

The knocking on the apartment door blended with Pablo Guzman's heavy snores. Somewhere in his slumbering mind, he must have been aware of the noise, must have sensed the desperation hanging on the other side of his door. If he did, he chose not to acknowledge it, instead rolling over in bed and covering his ears with a pillow. The city was full of noises, and from his first-floor studio apartment on *Corrientes*, Pablo heard all of them. The wail of sirens and the zip of motorcycles, the laughs of drunken teenagers and the *subte*'s unmistakable shake as it rumbled beneath the streets. In the past year Pablo had become familiar with a new set of noises as well—gunshots a few blocks over, screaming and a scuffle a few stories above. And

throughout it all, not a single other sound in the building. No neighbor called for help, or peaked down the hallway. Not a single person mentioned the disruption in the elevator the next morning. These days, it was best to ignore noises that didn't directly relate to you. And even if they did directly relate to you, it was likely in your best interest to ignore them all the same.

The knocking at Pablo's door persisted. Eventually the snoring stopped as Pablo opened his eyes and recognized the sound's proximity. But it was only when he heard a familiar voice, high pitched and apprehensive, that he managed to be alert enough to roll out of bed.

"Pablo Guzman, you *hijo de puta*, if you don't open this door I swear I will tear it down myself."

Pablo opened the door. In front of him stood Marcela, her curly hair pulled back in a messy braid and pushed to one side of her neck. It was a style she had worn often back when Pablo and Daniel were roommates at the university. She would come over to study after class, and Pablo would come home to find her sitting in the kitchen and twirling the end of her braid, intensely absorbed in her reading.

"How long have you been out there," grumbled Pablo, still half asleep. "You should have called first. What time is it anyway?"

"Early," Marcela snapped.

Pablo rubbed his eyes. It was then that he noticed the bags under Marcela's eyes, noticed the way she bit nervously on her lower lip. The area where her front teeth made contact with the skin was puffy and raw. And it was then that Pablo noticed that Daniel was not with her. He tried to think back to a time when Marcela had come to his apartment alone but couldn't. Comprehension dawned on him. He wished it hadn't.

"It's Daniel," said Marcela in a rush. "They took him."

"You're sure?" Pablo asked. He didn't need to clarify who the "they" was.

"A woman called me last night. She says she saw."

"Jesus."

The word hung between them. Pablo wasn't sure if he meant it as a curse or a prayer. He stared at Marcela, wanting desperately not to believe her but knowing from the panic in her bloodshot eyes that she had to be telling the truth.

"*Tranquila*, Marcela. Come, we should talk inside."

Marcela entered the apartment and headed straight for the kitchen table, where she slid exhausted into a chair. There was a beauty in her vulnerability; shaken as she was, Pablo was struck by how gracefully she managed to sit down. He closed the door behind her, taking care to turn the lock.

Pablo went into the kitchen and fumbled through the pantry for something to eat. This gave him a few minutes to compose himself and clear his mind. *Stay calm*, he willed himself. *Marcela needs you to stay calm*. After a few minutes, he returned to the table with lukewarm instant coffee and a plate of *medialunas*.

"They're a bit stale, I'm afraid," Pablo apologized. "Haven't had a chance to get to the *panaderia* recently."

Marcela made no attempt to touch the pastries.

"You saw him yesterday," said Marcela. It was an accusation, not a question. Pablo forced himself to take a bite of a *medialuna* so as to avoid meeting Marcela's eye. The buttery filo crumbled off in flakes against his fingers, and the dough felt dry and tasteless in his mouth.

"Pablo, what happened?"

“Nothing happened.” Marcela stared hard at him. “Really, nothing! He asked me to meet him in the plaza. I gave him some papers to distribute back in your neighborhood, and we went our separate ways. He was going to the *subte* to go home. I saw him walk into the station, I swear it.”

Somewhere in the course of his explanation, Pablo’s voice had transitioned from confidence to pleading. Guilt clung to his stomach; he thought he might be sick. Weren’t he and Daniel only just talking about kidnappings, about Martín’s disappearance? Was it his fault that Daniel had been taken? It couldn’t be. They had been doing this since the coup—over a year now—and nothing bad had happened. Their system worked, and there was no reason to suspect otherwise. But Pablo only had to glance at Marcela to know that she blamed him.

“Where’s Luz?” he asked, partly because he was concerned but partly because he wanted to steer the conversation away from his involvement in this mess.

“I left her with a neighbor. She almost wouldn’t watch her when I told her what happened. She said she’d help out this morning, but she doesn’t want to be associated with me. Said she can’t afford the risk.” At this, Marcela’s lips quivered, and her eyes, so sharp and accusing just seconds before, glazed over, the anger giving way to fear. In all the years he had known Marcela and Daniel, Pablo had never seen Marcela cry before. He wondered whether she would look just as pretty, or whether her face would transform to something ugly and unrecognizable beneath the tears.

“Your neighbor’s not entirely wrong,” Pablo sighed. “If the *militares* really do have Daniel, it’s not safe for anyone who associates with him, including you and I. That’s how it works, people are saying. They go along social networks, from friend to friend. If one person in a

social group is suspected of causing problems for the *junta*, everyone is. Never mind if they're innocent. Never mind if most of them are basically children."

"You are not a child anymore, Pablo. And you are not so innocent either." The spark of anger was back.

"I've done nothing wrong. If I'm guilty of anything, it's of having a mind of my own in a time when it's best you should not."

"You're guilty of bringing my husband into this mess. You're guilty of drawing attention to my family, of bringing problems into my house when all I want is safety. All I want is Daniel."

Pablo winced. Although he knew that this was what Marcela had been thinking, hearing her say it out loud, the blame materializing out of the vibrations of her vocal chords, was almost too much for Pablo.

"Daniel is not the only one," he whispered through clenched teeth. "Others have gone missing too. Esteban, Sebas. Mateo's daughter."

"I don't care about the others. I care about Daniel. You bring him back to me, Pablo. You help bring him home."

She rose stiffly from her chair. Pablo stood with her. He leaned over to kiss Marcela on the right cheek in the traditional Argentine goodbye. Her skin felt warm against his cheekbones, and Pablo felt a sudden desire to stay in that moment and let Marcela's skin linger against his own. But she was already pulling away, gathering her purse and her coat. She knocked over a cup of coffee as she pulled back, and the liquid spilled over the table, dripping down to the floor in large, dirty drops. They both stared at the mess, neither making a move to stop it.

"We'll find him," said Pablo. He tried to infuse his words with a sense of authority and confidence that he didn't really feel. "He didn't just vanish into thin air. Somebody's got to know something."

"Pablo—" said Marcela. Her voice had softened. "What do I *do*?"

"You wait," said Pablo. "You wait. And you search."

Oakerville, Georgia—June 2011

After breakfast, Isaac sent Nico out to the car to bring in some of the bags and suitcases that they had missed when they arrived the night before. The car door was hot to the touch, and Nico's hand recoiled from the metal as he stuck the key in the lock. Inside, the minivan looked like it had been hit by a tsunami. Gummy bears and bottles of water littered the floor, and Cecilia had left a pile of pretzel crumbs on her seat. In the back, a few suitcases remained, piled one on top of the other.

On an impulse, Nico climbed up to the front passenger seat. This area of the car was exclusively Luz's domain—she didn't like to drive, preferring to stay in the front where she could direct Isaac when he inevitably went the wrong way. A weird thrill came to Nico as he sat in front. It felt like going through the back of his mother's closet, or that time he and Jonny stole Cecilia's diary when they were 11.

The floor of the front seat was crowded with a collection of plastic grocery bags filled with what Luz liked to call "road trip essentials." These essentials ranged from the practical—extra maps, batteries, an emergency flashlight—to remedies for more unconventional emergencies—three boxes of easy mac, an assortment of nonfiction books-on-tape from the biography of John F. Kennedy to "An Idiot's Guide to Fencing," and a yo-yo.

Nico leaned forward and examined one of the bags, which was overflowing with various scraps of papers. Tucked into the pages of a battered copy of *CPR 101* was an old crinkled paper with the Jewish Traveler's Prayer written on it- *May it be Your will, Eternal One, our God and God of our ancestors, that You lead us toward peace...*

Nico had seen this same paper the week before, when he was helping his mother pack. "Better safe than sorry," Luz had told him when he asked about it, "you just never know, Nico." She had folded the traveler's prayer in a triangle and tucked it back into the emergency bags. She had then leaned over and kissed Nico on the forehead, and he got the feeling she was no longer talking about prayers or moving anymore. He seemed to have upset her somehow, but he wasn't sure what. "You just never know," she had repeated, softer this time.

In the rest of the bag were a few scattered gas station receipts and emergency contact lists. Among the papers he noticed the corner of a paper that was yellowed at the edges, and looked older than the rest. He pulled the sheet out from the pile. An ambiguous brown stain blurred the upper right corner. Coffee? *Mate*? Something else? Nico unfolded the paper and squinted to read the blurred typing:

From the Office of the Policía Provincial

Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires

23 de Octubre 1977

Mrs. Susterman,

I am writing in regards to the missing persons report you filed to us in May of this year, and the subsequent report that was filed in August requesting information on current prisoners of the Buenos Aires Justice System. I write to inform you that we have searched our records thoroughly, and there is no record of a Daniel Susterman detained in this facility, or in any of our other premises. I assure you that we are meticulous in our record keeping; the information you received of a detainee by that name in our system must have been misguided.

We are not at liberty to release our records or allow visitors at this time, but rest assured that the Policía Provincial takes all missing persons seriously.

We will continue to look into your particular case with professionalism and efficiency.

In the meantime, we kindly request your patience as we process your complaint in our database, a process that will take between 6 and 8 weeks. In the meantime, I suggest that you file a parallel claim with the ministry of law on Tucumán, as it is possible they may be able to provide some additional assistance. Should you have any further questions, please stop by our office to request an appointment, and one of our secretaries will be glad to help you in filing a new claim.

Yours Sincerely,

Juan Manuel Bolín

Head-Officer of the Policía Provincial, Station 7

Nico flipped the paper over when he finished reading, and noticed something written in smeared pencil on the backside. It looked vaguely like it could be a name and phone number, but he couldn't make out the details. He turned the paper back over and began to re-read it. Mrs. Susterman. Wasn't his mother's maiden name Susterman? But why would a police officer in Buenos Aires be writing his mother? Susterman... *La Bobe*. Suddenly it clicked. Mrs. Susterman was La Bobe. It had to be. Why else would Luz be carrying the letter around with her? But then...who was Daniel? And why did his grandmother seem to think he had been arrested?

Nico's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Peggy barking outside the car. He looked up to find Luz staring at him from the other side of the car window. Instinctively, he tried to shove the letter back in with the rest of the pile.

"Geez, Ma. You snuck up on me," he said as Luz opened the car door.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Getting the rest of the suitcases. Papá asked me t—"

Before Nico could continue, Luz had reached across him and picked up the letter. She stared hard at it, her eyes darting rapidly back and forth over the text. She then folded the letter slowly and carefully, and placed it in her back pocket.

"Ma, what's that letter about?" Nico asked.

"You shouldn't be looking through my things, Nico."

"Sorry," rushed Nico. It sounded inauthentic, even as he said it. "But the letter? Was that Bobe? Who's Daniel? Pa was telling us earlier about Buenos Aires before you immigrated..."

"He was *what*?"

"He said something about Bobe being really affected by it all."

"Nico, I think you should go back inside." Luz's voice was deceptively calm.

"But what about the suitcases?"

"Forget about them," She turned back toward the house without bothering to see if Nico was following. Nico stayed in the warm car, watching his mother's figure grow smaller as she walked up the long driveway into the house. He knew he shouldn't, but Nico stared back down at the bag of papers and reached in again. The letter had peaked his interest, and he wanted to know what else his mother had stored as "essential items."

From the bottom of the bag, Nico pulled out a stack of at least 20 envelopes, tied together with a faded red rubber band. He pulled it off, and saw that all of the letters were stamped in Oakersville and addressed to Luz. From Bobe, Nico guessed. They were all unopened.

Carefully, Nico slid his finger under the seal of the top letter. Inside, there were two black and white photographs. The first was a landscape shot that seemed to have been taken from the top of a mountain. A series of trees covered most of the frame, and a large streak of white, which Nico assumed must have come from a ray of sunlight, obscured the right side. The second picture was also black and white, but was smaller and looked much older. It was of an old, bearded man lifting a baby up in the air. On the back of the second photograph was written, "Zaydel y Luz, 1975."

Nico picked up the rest of the envelopes. They were about the same weight, and he imagined that they too, were filled with photographs like this one. Why was Bobe sending pictures rather than letters. And why had his mother not opened a single one? Nico wanted to keep looking through the other pictures, but he was afraid of getting caught snooping twice in a row. He thought about what his father had said that morning and especially about the contents of the letter. If his family always moved forward, then why was Luz carrying all these letters around with her after all this time?

Buenos Aires, Argentina—Mayo 1977

“Next,” called out the police secretary, his monotone voice reverberating through the static of the overhead PA system. Marcela jumped up and pushed her way through the crowded waiting room. Others glared as she reached the front and handed a slip with her wait number—267—to the guard, who directed her toward help desk number three. She ignored their stares. It had taken her nearly a week of waiting to finally get a call number low enough to be seen.

She was in a government office building a block from Plaza de Mayo, and as she passed by the windows she could just make out the top of *La Casa Rosada*, where General Videla and his council of military officials resided.

The police secretary at desk number three was middle-aged, unusually short, and incredibly round. His stomach bulged over the top of his belt, the buttons of his uniform threatening to burst. As Marcela approached the desk, he was scribbling furiously on a sheet of paper, the ink smudging on his large, sweaty fingers.

“Are you here about a traffic violation?” The secretary did not look up.

“No,” said Marcela.

"Immigration report?"

"No."

"Because traffic violations are handled at the *departamento de transportación*, you know.

And immigration is downstairs and to the left."

"But I just said I wasn't here for either of those things."

"Well why *are* you here?" demanded the secretary.

"It's about my husband."

"Work pension?"

"No."

"Army service?" The man continued to scribble on his forms.

"No." Marcela wanted to grab the pen from the secretary, break it in half, and throw it across the room. She imagined the ink splattering across the window, its ugly stain blacking out the sight of the Pink House. "He hasn't been home for three weeks now."

"Oh. Well missing persons reports are handled by the offices downstairs." The secretary reached over to press the intercom button to call the next number in line.

"Well excuse me sir, but is there anything you *do* handle?"

At this, the man looked up, his finger still hovering over the call button. Disdain dripped from his mouth as he spoke. "Look, lady. I've got a job to do. I don't have time for troublemakers coming into my office and taking time away from people with real problems. This is a police office, you know. For people who need help."

"I need help," cried Marcela. "My husband has gone missing."

"We get a lot of missing persons reports here, *señora*. And to be frank, very few of them are well-founded."

"I don't know what you're trying to imply."

The man rolled his eyes and sighed. He began to speak very slowly, as if he were explaining things to a small child.

"The first couple years of a new government are a time of transition. In such times, people's imaginations tend to run away with them. Everyone always thinks his missing child or boyfriend or sister is the only one. Always assumes kidnapping or death. You've been reading too many mystery novels. To be frank, your husband is probably off in Brazil somewhere, run away with some secret lover."

Marcela felt the blood rush to her face. How dare he. How *dare* he. Somewhere in the back of her mind, a small bubble of insecurity surfaced as she remembered all the nights Daniel had not returned home, all the times she herself had suspected another woman. Could there be some truth in this man's words? Could Daniel be capable of such a thing?

"So that's it, then. You won't help me."

"Like I said, missing persons department is downstairs. But I wouldn't bother. You said he's been gone three weeks, and it needs to have been at least six to be considered a valid claim."

Marcela had to fight the urge to scream. "I know you have him. I know you've got him somewhere, don't tell me I don't have a valid claim."

The secretary smirked in condescension. "Oh, so now the *policia* are the criminals as well as the law-enforcers."

"Where are you keeping him?!"

"If your husband had been arrested for something, he would have been charged, and you would have received a phone call from him. Standard procedure."

“Well I haven’t received anything. And yet I know you have him. So please, tell me what that means.”

“It means he doesn’t exist.” The man pushed his finger on the call button and called out. “next.”

Oakersville, Georgia—June 2011

Nico was convinced Oakersville didn’t exist. The Stepenskys had been at the cabin three days already, and he had yet to see the town itself. He had asked his father to drive them to the main street so he could explore a bit, but Isaac just said, “there’s not much to see, kiddo. You’d be wasting your time.”

But Nico already felt like he was wasting his time. Their second day at the cabin, Luz had announced that she had been in contact with Bobe, who was expecting them over for dinner Friday night. In the meantime, Luz suggested they just relax around the cabin. The problem was that nobody seemed able to relax. Isaac had spent the past three days doing crossword puzzles on his iPad and reading the instruction manual for the cabin’s microwave like it was the world’s most gripping crime novel. Cecilia mainly alternated between sulking, doing handstands on yoga mats, and talking on the phone with Ray all day long about things like bioethics.

Luz was the most restless of everyone. She took long walks every morning and then sat by herself in the kitchen, knitting an ambiguous article of clothing that looked like a cross between a sock and a hood. She would knit for a few minutes, get up and walk around, and then return to her work. Nico wanted to ask her about Bobe again, but something about her nervousness kept him at bay.

With nothing to do and nobody inside the cabin to entertain him, Nico decided to go outside in an attempt to cure his boredom. He wandered around the back of the cabin, which extended into a larger forest. There, pine trees shot up 30 feet in the air, and a tall oak tree that must have been hundreds of years old towered above them all, its branches stretching wide across the blue sky. The oak looked to Nico like a lone soldier, standing guard over all of the other trees. There was not another house in sight, only the sun and the expanse of green speckled with pinecones. Overhead, a hawk flew by and then swept down somewhere behind one of the trees in search of food.

Nico had never seen anything like it, and as he and Peggy weaved through the pines, he had a sudden urge to climb one of them. Peggy barked at the passing hawks and chased rolling pinecones. Of all the Stepenskys, she seemed to be the only member of the family who was genuinely happy to be there. Nico was jealous of her carefree attitude.

Nico thought of all his family ignoring him inside the cabin, and of how frustrating it was to be cooped up at the cabin all day. He would go to Oakersville himself, he decided. Maybe he would even run into Bobe there.

~ ~ ~

After 15 minutes walking along the gravel path, Oakersville at last came into view, proving that civilization did in fact exist in the region. Nico had to admit that Isaac was right: the town wasn't much to look at. The main street was dusty and seemingly deserted, except for a few mustached truckers smoking cigarettes outside a sleazy looking motel. They stared at Peggy limping down the sidewalk, and Nico hurried past them. A single traffic light swung in the wind above the street's only intersection, but not a single car drove by.

Aside from the motel the street's greatest attractions were a gas station, a small grocery store called Freddy's Foods, a diner offering a grits and waffles deal, and a billiards hall which advertised itself as "Home of Oakersville's favorite pastime!" All the signs had layers of peeling paint and looked like they hadn't been renovated since well before Nico was born. The letters were dusted in a grimy coating of red clay.

Nico couldn't help but wonder what had drawn his grandmother to this place. It was terribly boring in comparison with Miami's crowded suburbs, six-lane highways, and sweeping palm trees. And Oakersville didn't seem to compensate for its smallness with any sort of quaint small-town charm. Although the cabin was only a short walk away, its beautiful pine trees and hills were far removed from this dull, ugly town.

At the end of the main street was a post office. Nico stared at the small blue building when he realized with a start that this must be the same post office that the neurologist had mentioned to his mother, where La Bobe had barged in demanding to see her long-dead husband. He decided to go inside. The post office was small and near empty with the exception of two bored-looking employees waiting behind the counter, and an elderly lady with a large package in tow. Nico held the door open for her as she left, and she smiled gratefully at him. For a second Nico thought maybe it could be Bobe. But the woman was too old, and her cropped silver hair was straight rather than curly. He stepped out of the way to let her pass.

"No dogs allowed," called out one of the mail clerks. He was a chubbyish man with blond hair and the biggest scowl Nico had ever seen. He looked at Peggy with such disdain that Nico was afraid he might come out from behind the counter and kick her.

"Er...she's a seeing-eye dog." Nico stepped protectively in front of Peggy. The blonde man looked down at Peggy with her three legs, and back up at the obviously not blind Nico, and then back at Peggy.

"Aw, c'mon Tom, let him stay," called out the other employee behind the counter. She was younger than Tom, and her hair was piled high in a ponytail. She looked like she might have been pretty, had it not been for the acne scars that coated her forehead and cheekbones, and her browned, crooked teeth. Still, her eyes were warm.

"He can't hardly walk, he won't hurt nothing."

"Betsy, you know how I feel about animals..." Tom was still eyeing Peggy like she might pounce at any moment.

"Grow a pair, Tom. It's just a puppy. Now then," she said, turning to Nico. "How can we help you today?"

"Um, I'm actually not trying to send a letter or anything..." Nico hesitated. He hadn't actually thought about what he would *do* inside the post office.

"Oh, you must be that kid from the high school in Macon. The one who called last week about doing an article for the school paper? Charlie something? How come you never showed last Friday?"

Nico could feel an opportunity presenting itself. "Yep, that's me," he lied through his teeth. "Charlie. Charlie from Macon. Sorry about, er, missing our appointment."

"Don't you worry about it. Nice to meet you, Charlie. I'm Betsy. And this wimp over here is Tom."

"Uh, hi."

"Well I suppose you probably want to ask us about how the recession's affecting the postal business," said Betsy. She was getting really excited, and she hopped up on the counter, letting her feet dangle over the edge. It was clear she wasn't often given the opportunity to answer questions.

"It's been rough, what with the private options like UPS and everyone and their momma sending emails nowadays. We had to cut down staff and now it's just me and Tom and this lady Jules who works weekends. But I think soon things will really turn around for us, right Tom? No matter what, people are always gonna need to send packages. There ain't no other way for an object to get from point A to point B."

"Uh, actually," Nico interrupted. "I—or, the newspaper that is," he corrected. "—was wondering if you could talk about any unusual happenings around here in the last few months. You know, strange packages, maybe some crazy customers..."

"Well there was that lady a few months ago...remember her Tom?" Tom nodded, his eyes still trained on Peggy, who was now tugging at a sign about passport pictures.

"But it's hardly worth mentioning now. Just an old lady who was a bit out of it, nothing too exciting about it all."

"No," Nico insisted. "I'd really like to know about it. The article's a human interest piece, you see." He hoped he sounded convincing. He had tried to imitate how Cecilia sounded when she was making a particularly argumentative point, but he got the feeling he just sounded whiny instead. Betsy didn't seem to mind, however.

"Well, I can't remember her name," she said, "but I've seen her around before. With only 800 people you get to see everyone from time to time, especially working at the post office. She

would come in here every once in a while to send out a tax form or buy some stamps or something. She never talked much though. I actually thought she was a mute for a while."

"What'd she look like," Nico asked. He felt his heart skip.

"Real tiny woman, with curly hair. Old, too. But not *old*, old, y'know? Not like geriatric about-to-fall-over-old. Mostly she just had graying hair and these really dark eyes. She stared at me sometimes. Not in a nasty way, though. Just kinda wide-eyed like a baby might stare at someone. Real strange. Oh, and she always wore a lot of bracelets too."

The bracelets. She still wore the bracelets.

"But anyhow," Betsy continued. "She came in here a few months ago and she was all in a tizzy about something. Tom and me were working and there was a man here in front of her who was trying to send off 250 birthday invitations one at a time instead of in bulk. He was gonna pay all in quarters too. And the lady, I could tell she was getting real impatient because she kept tapping her foot and sighing real loudly. To tell you the truth, I was getting frustrated myself. That's a whole lotta quarters to count. But still, it wasn't like her to be making a fuss, her usually being so quiet and all."

"She wasn't just tapping her foot," Tom added. "She was straight out of her mind, that woman."

"What do you mean?" asked Nico.

"She got out of line and started knocking things over," said Tom. "I had just finished a new display of fixed-price box sizes and she knocked the whole thing over, if you can believe it. Kept saying we were keeping some dude named Daniel locked up in the mailroom. She pronounced it funny, too. Dan-EE-el. I tried to tell her I'd never even met anyone by that name but she said I was a liar and kept shouting his name over and over."

"It was quite a scandal," Betsy lowered her voice conspiratorially. "She kept saying something about how she knew what we really were, that we were monsters. She kept talking about bodies being drowned in some river. By this point I didn't know what to do and the guy who was paying all with quarters was yelling at her to go home, so I called the sheriff. I hate to get anyone in trouble with the law, but what else was I supposed to do? We're understaffed, as I said. So the sheriff came, and he plumb didn't know what to do himself because she wouldn't calm down, but he didn't want to arrest an unarmed old lady neither. So he called the hospital out in Macon and they said to bring her all the way out there for an appointment. But that took a bit of work too because she was still yelling about this Dan-ee-el fellow. Eventually the sheriff convinced her that if she came with him he would drive her to where the guy was being kept, and that did the trick. I'm not sure what happened after they left, though. But she hasn't been back since."

"And good riddance," huffed Tom.

"Thanks," said Nico. "That's all been very helpful. I should be going now though."

"But don't you wanna take our names and get our picture?" Betsy pouted. She pulled her ponytail tighter.

"Hey now, you haven't even been taking any notes this whole time," said Tom. He glanced at Peggy again, suspicious. "What Macon school did you say you were from again?"

"Oh...uh, you know, the big one..." said Nico. "The other editor will be down here for pictures tomorrow." With Tom still glaring he whistled to Peggy and quickly turned to leave.

Buenos Aires, Argentina—Agosto 1977

As Doctor Alvarez walked through the narrow hallway of the infirmary wing, he put a gloved hand to his face to block the smell. In the past six months his senses had taken in many things they shouldn't have. He had seen with his own eyes a 17-year-old boy strapped to an electric current, his body writhing in a twisted parody of a dance. When the boy at last fell limp on the table, the doctor had seen the way the smoke rose from the pores of his skin, curling out from his blackened fingertips: a slain dragon.

And then there had been the girl. The doctor didn't know what she looked like, didn't want to. But her voice had filled the hall for hours, so shrill and piercing that no matter what the doctor did to distract himself, he could not ignore the sound of the voice overriding his own thoughts. First she pleaded for release. And then, later, for death. And finally there were no words at all, just a steady pulse of screams like heartbeats, instinctive and involuntary, so guttural that had the doctor not heard previously, he would not have believed they were human. Even after the screaming had at last stopped, the noise still echoed through his eardrums for days after in a faint high-pitched buzz.

Guilt clung to Doctor Alvarez like a hidden parasite deep in his intestines, a worm attacking his conscience, devouring him from the inside out.

But the doctor's conscience fought back.

And this was the marvelous thing about the human brain, with its tangle of neurons and chemical connections: it was built for erasure. The doctor barricaded these memories, left them to rot in the deepest cavities of his mind alongside the images of his father slapping his mother across the face at a dinner party, of his classmates laughing as they stole his books and tripped

him on the way home from school. Locked in the recesses of his cerebral cortex, the horrors the doctor witnessed could stay where they couldn't affect him.

The smell was another matter entirely.

It was unyielding, assaulting his nose with its obstinate presence. A mix of dried sweat and blood, putrid and sweet, layered beneath the stench, dog-like, of urine and unwashed clothes. And layered further still, there was something more pungent, more repulsive. The desperate smell of death. It followed the doctor around like an unrelenting virus, clung to the fibers of his coat and the proteins of his hairs. Years later, when the doctor was much older and miles away, he would wake in the middle of the night and the smell would still be there, lingering off the tail end of his dreams. No matter how many times he scrubbed his skin raw and let the steaming shower water run rivers down his spine, the doctor was never able to wash away the stink.

He hadn't planned for this.

When the *militares* first approached him eight months earlier, Alvarez had been honored. Up in his office in the after-hours of a Tuesday afternoon, the doctor had poured out glasses of his finest aged whiskey while the general admired the many degrees and awards that decorated the office walls. The awards were a source of great pride for Doctor Alvarez. As an ambitious young medical student, he had been dogmatic in his work ethic, insistent on forming lasting relationships with his patients. This foundation of trust and dependability had paid off. Now in his early 40s, the doctor had become known as one of the most reliable medical practitioners in *Recoleta*. He was a man of character, a man to be depended on. Reliability, it turned out, was the secret to make you rich.

"As you are surely aware, *señor*, we of the newly-formed *junta* have great plans for *La Argentina*," the general had begun. "We want to bring back order to this country. We want to

build her up, make her great and prosperous again, like she was in the days of *Facundo*.” The general sat very stiffly on the doctor’s couch and downed the whiskey all in one gulp. The doctor had noted all the different medals and pins on the general’s uniform, perfectly spaced across the ironed green shirt. Now here was a man like himself, the doctor had thought. Distinguished, sensible, honored for his accomplishments. At last the right sort of person was in charge of the country. Somebody with ambition, somebody with a backbone.

“But we cannot make Argentina shine on our own,” the general had continued. “No, to make her succeed, we need citizens we can depend on. Citizens like you, *señor*.”

Citizens we can depend on. The words echoed through the doctor’s head as he entered the examining room. He wondered, as he had countless times before, if he would have said yes to the general so readily had he known what was coming. Would he have offered his patriotic and medical services had he known how many “enemies of the state” were little more than pot-smoking teenagers with an affinity for *Rock Nacional*? Would he have jumped so readily at the call of duty if he had known about the boy with smoke rising from his skin, the girl with screams like bombshells? And what about the babies? Would the doctor have shaken the general’s hand so enthusiastically had he known he would deliver infants to mothers who would never be allowed to hold them? What would he have done knowing he would soon be handing those screaming bundles of life over to the general’s supporters, to be raised by the very people who murdered their parents.

Had he known all this before, would he still have agreed? The doctor didn’t know. But here he was, day after day, driving to this hellhole on the fringes of the city, convincing himself that this gruesome work of treating tortured prisoners—stitching up their wounds and breaking their fevers—might somehow benefit the greater good.

The doctor entered an examining room in the infirmary wing—a converted classroom of a deserted naval training facility. A dusty chalkboard still decorated one of the walls, and the room was littered with rusty chairs and vandalized desks. A soldier standing guard at the door greeted the doctor with a familiar nod, and then stepped outside to wait. As the door banged shut behind him, Alvarez shifted his attention toward the center of the room, where a dark-haired man in his late 20s sat atop an “examining table” made of several old desks shoved together. The man was tall and thin, and his legs stretched awkwardly off the desks. He was bleeding profusely from a cut over his right eyebrow.

As the doctor approached, the man looked up and met his eyes. It was a wild look of confusion mixed with apprehension, but the doctor saw through the bewilderment to the pointed question beneath it. He had seen this same look on nearly every patient he had treated in this facility. Pain or relief, the eyes asked. Pain or relief. Those were the only words that held any weight here, the only realities that existed in the confines of the naval academy. It was an endless cycle of the two, on and off and on again. Beatings, recovery. Questions, sleep. Pain. Relief. Pain. Relief. Pain.

The doctor took a deep breath and opened his briefcase on an empty desk. He pulled out some sheets of gauze, and from the corner of his eye saw the man’s shoulders relax. Relief today.

“Hold this in place,” the doctor said as he pressed the gauze to the man’s brow. The man complied.

After a minute, the man asked: “*Che*, do you know what day it is?” He spoke with a lisp, his voice so low and hoarse that even standing so close, the doctor almost didn’t hear.

Alvarez frowned at the use of the familiar *che*. He and this man were not friends. In fact, they were the opposite of friends. Whoever this man was, his life choices had led him to the prisoner side of the equation, whereas the doctor's had led him to the other.

"You can just call me doctor," he answered. "And it's the twenty third of Agosto."

"*Agosto*," the man said, and the syllables rolled off his tongue like he had never heard the word before. He licked his cracked lips. "*Agosto*."

Doctor Alvarez pulled on a pair of gloves and began to thread a silver needle to stitch the busted brow.

"*Agosto*. That means..." the man looked like he was struggling to solve a very complex math problem. "...Three months? Yes, three months," he said more decisively. "How long have you been here doctor?" he asked.

"Longer than that," said Doctor Alvarez. He leaned the man's head back and pushed the needle through the skin. The man's expression changed only slightly, a flicker of a grimace.

"I hear they release people sometimes," he said a little louder, encouraged by Alvarez's response. "A boy last week told me he had been in and out three times already."

The doctor concentrated on his finger work, pulling the thread back and forth over the knotted strip of blood and hair. This wasn't the first time a patient had mentioned release in these rooms. And it was true. Release did happen sometimes. But it was rare, and it was random. And the doctor had no say in any of it. He never understood it, this rush of optimism that seemed to overtake the prisoners. He never understood why they talked to him at all.

At last the doctor finished the brow with a looped knot of the medical thread. He evaluated the prisoner, who was still licking his cracked lips but had now closed his eyes. He breathed in slow, ragged intervals. The man was not as young as the average prisoner, but he was

not so old either. Aside from the brow, he was in relatively good shape. A few obvious bruises on the legs, but nothing broken, nothing burned. The doctor was impressed. Three months, the man had said. Anywhere else, three months was nothing, barely a complete season. But to make it three months here...it was an eternity.

"Pull up your shirt," the doctor said. "I can check out the rest of you while you're here, put some ointment or bandages on any cuts or sores you might have."

The man opened his eyes again and looked up, only this time the doctor could not read the expression in his eyes, could not look past the blur of the iris to the implicit question below. The dark eyes were curiously blank.

"I said, pull up your shirt."

The man obeyed, but he continued to stare at the doctor as he did so. The shirt was thin and ragged, likely the same one he had been wearing when he was taken. The man lifted the fabric and placed it in a ball next to him on the desk. The doctor's mouth dropped. Just when he thought he had seen everything there was to be seen, there was always more. There was always, always more.

The man's chest, pale and hairless, was painted with a large, black swastika. The doctor stared at the symbol. The sharp black paint was stark against the flaking dry skin stretched along the ribcage. The doctor's own chest swelled with a heaviness, as if his lungs were lined with bricks. Somewhere in the closeted sections of his brain, a lock unhinged. An image of his father, cigar in hand, shouting about the *judios*, their ugly beards and hats and noses. Their filthy unions, their un-Argentine politics. The doctor tried to push the memory back in its place, tried to box the image of his father's face, drunken, red, raging, back where it belonged. But the transmitters of his brain flickered with connection, and the neurons shot wildly across his mind. His father's

cigar. The filthy *judios*. The sound of his father's hand slapped backwards across his mother's face.

The doctor let his eyes float upwards. Above the swastika hung a necklace with a peculiar charm. It looked like a little hut with an apostrophe on the end. 'n. The apostrophe-like symbol had a little blue gemstone in the center. The doctor had never seen anything like it.

"Well?" asked the man, and his voice was flat. The optimism only moments before had dissipated. "Do you have an ointment for this? Is there a bandage in that box of yours that will take it away?"

The doctor swallowed hard.

"I didn't think so." The man reached for his shirt, and began to pull it back over.

Looking away, Doctor Alvarez began to replace his tools in his briefcase. A void, impossibly large, had opened up between the doctor and the prisoner. The doctor thought back to his former practice, back to a time when patient was not synonymous with enemy, when the healing he did actually mattered. Reliable. He used to be reliable.

Alvarez was about to leave and call for the guard when the man spoke again. "*Che.*" The doctor looked over, and the man was holding something out in his hand.

"Take it for me," said the man, and he opened his palm to reveal the necklace he had been wearing.

"*What.*"

"The necklace," the man said. "Take it."

"Why?"

The man shrugged. "You aren't like the rest of them. I can tell."

"You don't know anything about what I'm like."

“All the same, I want you to have it. It’s...” the man coughed. “It’s better than it staying here with me. I’m sure of that much. It means life, you know. See those letters? They say *Chai*. For life.”

The doctor reached over and took the necklace from the man’s filthy palm. It was cool to the touch, and the silver felt heavy and smooth in his hand. He decided to take it. He wasn’t sure why.

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In the days and weeks that followed, the doctor took to carrying around the necklace with him in the inner pocket of his suit jacket, a sort of good luck charm. On breaks he would take it out, examine the contours of the strange shapes, polish the blue gem. *Life*, the man had said. *It means life*. The doctor had the feeling he would not be meeting the man again in the infirmary wing.

Oakersville, Georgia—June 2011

Nico took his time walking home from the post office. All the way back to the cabin he couldn’t stop thinking about what Betsy had said about La Bobe. She had been searching for someone named Daniel, the same as the man in the letter. And Luz had told Isaac that La Bobe had been searching for her father. That made Daniel Luz’s father. Which made him Nico’s grandfather. His grandfather was one of the people Isaac had talked about, who had been kidnapped by the government. That was what he had meant about Luz’s side of the family being more affected.

And all these years, Nico had never known. He felt an anger surging through him that he had never experienced before. He wasn't even sure to whom the anger was directed at. He was mad at his parents for never telling him the truth. At Bobe for acting so crazy. At the Argentine government, for doing something that messed up to his family. And even at Daniel himself, for disappearing so that Nico never had a chance to know him. He kicked the dirt as he walked back through the town.

By the time Nico arrived at the cabin it was already dinnertime, and the sun had just set behind the pine trees. As he approached the front door, Cecilia came around from the side of the house.

"Ma! I found him!" she called behind her. Quieter, she said to Nico: "Man, you are so completely screwed."

"What? Why?"

"You seriously thought it would be chill to disappear for a while without telling Ma and Pa? Not. Chill. They're super pissed. I would turn around and leave again if I were you."

Just then, Luz emerged from the backyard with a flashlight in hand. Nico couldn't remember her ever looking that angry.

"Where. Have. You. Been." She stood a foot's length away, looking like she couldn't decide whether to hug him or strangle him.

"I just went for a walk, Ma. Calm down."

"Do *not* tell me to calm down," she snapped, and Cecilia raised her eyebrows and mouthed I-told-you-so.

"Do you *know* how long we've been looking for you? How much you scared me? I nearly had your father call the police. Who knows what could have happened to you?"

"Ma we're in the middle of nowhere, nothing could have happened to me. I was just bored. I wanted to see the town, that's all."

"You are grounded for the next month. No, for the next year. Actually, you are grounded permanently. No video games or TV or dating until you're married."

"How can I get married if you never let me date," Nico muttered, but his mother didn't appear to be listening.

"What if something had happened," she kept repeating, over and over again. "What if something had happened."

Buenos Aires, Argentina—Septiembre 1977

"Pablo, are you home?" Marcela burst into Pablo's apartment without bothering to knock. Ever since Daniel's disappearance four months earlier she had started coming by so often that Pablo had given her a key of her own. He had promised to help in any way he could, and so far he had kept his promise. Not that it did much good. Everyone they tried—and by now, they had tried everyone—met them with blank stares or dismissive answers. And this was the hardest part. Worse even than Daniel's absence was the staunch denial of his very existence. It was as if, when Daniel had disappeared, he had taken with him everything that had come before, all the years he had shared with Marcela, the friction but also the love. She was searching for someone who was not real, the official records told her. And how could she miss something that was never there to begin with?

"Somebody's got to know," Pablo kept repeating. But whoever knew was not coming forth with information easily. And as the weeks and months kept passing with no new information, the life she had shared with Daniel seemed farther and farther away.

"Pablo?" Marcela called again. The small kitchen was empty. A bowl of cereal remained on the table half-eaten, and water dripped from a faucet that had not turned off all the way. Some of the papers Pablo must have been editing for the newspaper had been knocked off the table, littering the tile floor. Marcela's pulse tightened, and an all-too-familiar dread filled her.

Not again, she thought. *This can't be happening again*. She stared at the dripping faucet, the liquid mocking her with its subtle splatter. In the past months, she had come to rely on Pablo not only for information and help with her search, but also simply for company. As much as she wanted to hate Pablo for getting Daniel involved politically—and on bad days she *did* hate him—he had become a sort of support system for her. He was the only person she trusted to care for Luz when she went in search of Daniel. And his was the only apartment she frequented besides her own.

But now, in the empty kitchen, Marcela's stomach lurched. They couldn't take Pablo too. Marcela thought she might faint.

"In here!" Pablo called out from his bedroom, and Marcela let out her breath. He buttoned up his shirt and entered the kitchen, where Marcela was still frozen in place, staring at the half-eaten food.

"Everything okay?" asked Pablo.

"I just—I thought..." Marcela shuddered. "Never mind. Yes, everything's fine."

"How was the appointment with the police?" Pablo asked. He brushed by Marcela and picked up the remainder of his breakfast. There was something about the way he carried himself in that moment that reminded Marcela very much of Daniel.

"Bullshit, like usual." Marcela pulled up a chair beside him and shoved a bunch of ripped-open letters across the table. "This is all they give me. Bullshit, all of it. The provincial

police send me to the city police and the city police send me to the government offices downtown and the government offices send me back to the provincial police. And they all say the same exact thing—that military activity is outside of their jurisdiction.” Her cheeks flushed with anger. “Pablo, I’m not sure how much more I can take of this. It’s been four months now. Where *is* he?”

“Well, I may have some good news for you,” said Pablo. He smiled at her. It was a full-mouthed smile, stretching across the entire width of his face. Marcela couldn’t help but notice how white his teeth were, how they matched the brightness of his eyes. Funny, that she had never noticed how striking a smile he had before. “I think I may have a lead.”

“A lead?” Marcela was sure she must have heard wrong. For the second time in two minutes her heart raced, only this time out of hope rather than fear.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Pablo added quickly, as if reading her mind. “It’s not much to go on, just a name on paper. It’s not a guarantee. But the man supposedly knows what happens to the disappeared. He may be able to bring us closer to Daniel.”

“Who is he? How does he know about Daniel?” Marcela asked, but already she didn’t care about the answer. It didn’t matter who he was or how he knew. There was information. There was someone out there who could tell the truth, who could look her in the eye and tell her that Daniel was a real, living person whose absence had been noted.

“My friend Tomás knows him,” said Pablo. “I’m not sure where he got the address, but he says it’s valid. When you go, you should wait outside the apartment for him. Don’t try to page him from inside. He has a balding head and he’s doctor, so he wears a lab coat. That’s how you’ll be able to recognize him. He also usually has a briefcase in hand. But that’s as much

information as I have.” Pablo handed over the note. Scrawled in Pablo’s half-hazard handwriting, it read:

*Señor José Alvarez
Santa Fe 1192, Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires*

José Alvarez. It was an official sounding name. And he was a doctor, no less. He would know how to get Daniel back. He had to know. She threw her arms around Pablo and kissed him on the cheek. Instinctively, his arms wrapped around her and squeezed her into a tighter embrace. Marcela remembered the way Daniel used to hug her when he came home from work and smiled. For the first time in months, a little gem of hope made its way back to Marcela. She seized it, determined not to let it slip away again.

Oakerville, Georgia—June 2011

On Friday night, a very tense group piled into the purple minivan. Luz kept checking and double-checking that they had locked the cabin door and that they were all ready to go. She was also still angry about Nico’s unannounced outing a few days before, and Nico was still bitter about being grounded indefinitely. Luz hadn’t even allowed him to leave the house without supervision, which seemed a little excessive given that he had already seen Oakerville, the one place there was to go from the cabin. Cecilia sat in the back of the car, ignoring everyone and texting Ray from her phone. Although she refused to acknowledge it, Nico suspected that she was actually as anxious as everyone else about dinner. She kept glancing up from her phone when she thought no one was looking and then looking down again rapidly.

“Well, it sure will be exciting to see where your grandmother’s been living all these years!” exclaimed Isaac, the only one of the family whose spirits refused to be dampened.

They reached the end of Oakersville's main street, passing by the post office Nico had visited the day before. He hadn't told anyone about his conversation with Betsy and Tom, or about what he had figured out about his grandfather, and the knowledge was overwhelming him. Isaac turned the car onto a side road so small it could have been mistaken for a driveway. Nico was surprised they hadn't driven right by it, but then he noticed the GPS system blinking from the front seat. It seemed that Isaac had at last figured out how to use it after all.

The van's tires bounced unevenly on the gravel road, which wound snake-like up the side of a hill. The car at last skidded to a stop near the top. Isaac had parked in front of a series of maybe a dozen small cottages, each nearly identical to the next. They stood on the edge of the cliff in a small cluster. The houses might have been white originally, but age and dust had turned them to a pale grayish yellow. As the family unloaded from the car, Nico was reminded of a book he had read once involving an apocalyptic community waiting on a hill to be zapped up by aliens to heaven. If he was going to wait for the apocalypse, Nico wasn't sure this would be his first pick.

Isaac led the way to a cottage at the far end of the "neighborhood." It was identical to the others, except it had a small fence that offset the border of the property. The grass behind the fence was long and ragged, and a few dandelions sprouted in clusters. In the middle of the lawn was a small grill with an incongruous red rocking chair pulled next to it. Nico had a sudden flashback of *carne asada*, steaks roasting for hours over a hot grill. Nico could remember seeing the outline of his grandmother's figure as she turned the meat over and over until it grew tender under the slow work of the fire. He remembered his legs swinging in the pool, his mouth watering as the scent wafted across the backyard. But whose backyard was it? La Bobe's or his own?

Nico turned to Luz. She was dressed in a nice skirt, and her hair was pulled back in a tight, careful bun. Her clothes looked strangely out of place against the backdrop of the cottages. She was looking at the house with severe trepidation. Nico got the feeling that the memories of La Bobe passing through her mind were vastly different from his own.

"Ready?" asked Isaac. Luz took a deep breath and nodded. She began to walk up the path to the front door. Everyone else hung back by the fence, in unspoken agreement that this moment was for Luz and La Bobe alone.

"Do you think she'll remember us," whispered Ceci. She was no longer checking her phone. Her eyes clung to Luz's back, and she did not even attempt to conceal her blatant staring.

Luz stood outside the house for a minute, smoothing out her skirt even though it was already perfectly ironed. She then pushed back her shoulders and rang the bell.

Buenos Aires—Septiembre 1977

La Avenida de Santa Fe buzzed with motion. School children in white smocks and pleated navy skirts chased each other on the way home, weaving in and out of the busy sidewalks. Angry *taxistas* honked their horns at the rush hour traffic and cut through red lights. Stiff-looking old ladies sat at the tables outside cafés, cupping their afternoon coffees with white gloves and frowning in disapproval at the stray dogs and rowdy kids.

Throughout it all, Marcela waited just outside Santa Fe 1192. It was an expensive apartment building, much taller and older than her own. Its balconies were decorated with an elegant gold trim against the white stone of the building. She looked with wonder through the glass doors into the lobby, where a doorman sat at a desk and eyed her with disapproval. The floor was a beautiful mosaic of black and gold, and the walls were decorated with paintings of

the *Recoleta* cemetery and a couple dancing the tango in old *San Telmo*. Marcela had been peeking inside for over an hour now, but she didn't mind. She had been waiting four months for this day; she could wait a little longer. The blatant display of wealth only added to her confidence. This was a home for rich men, Marcela thought, powerful men. The man who lived here had to be important. The man who lived here could help.

After a long while, a man who fit Pablo's description at last walked toward the apartment building. Balding, with a doctor's coat and a briefcase.

"Señor Alvarez?" Marcela asked. She stepped in front of the path that led to the lobby door.

The man looked startled. "Do I know you?" he asked. He rubbed his free hand over the bald patch of his head.

"My name is Marcela Susterman." She straightened her shoulders, recalling her mother once telling her that no one would take her seriously if she slumped. And if there was any moment where she needed to be taken seriously, it was this one. "A...friend...told me you might be able to help me. I'm looking for my husband, you see."

"I'm sorry, but I don't know what you're talking about," the doctor replied. He tried to step around her on the path but Marcela stepped again with him, blocking his way.

"You do know," she insisted. "You must."

"Must I?" asked the doctor.

"He's been missing since May."

The doctor considered her. He appeared conflicted.

"I was told you know what happens to the people who disappear," she said. "Please. He has a family. A daughter."

The doctor continued to rub his head nervously, but he seemed to have made up his mind. He nodded toward the door and began to walk. Silently, Marcela followed him inside.

The interior of the doctor's apartment was just as impressive as the exterior, if not more so. The doctor led Marcela into a large study. A bookshelf completely filled with medical volumes and anatomy textbooks covered the back wall, while the others were decorated with framed diplomas and various awards. There was a large mahogany desk in the center, and on top of the desk many more books were piled neatly in a corner. Everything looked pristine and perfectly placed.

"Please, have a seat," said the doctor, slipping behind the desk. He pulled off his coat and sat down himself. Without the white jacket, the doctor looked less distinguished, and more tired. Sweat stains lined his armpits and collar.

Marcela opened her purse. She had come prepared. Nothing came for free these days, least of all information. She had gathered up all the money she could find in the apartment and borrowed some from Pablo as well. She placed the money she had brought in neat stacks on the table, trying to mimic the orderly stacks of books.

The doctor stared at the piles of bills. He picked one up and inspected it, flipping the papers through his fingers. "What is this?" he asked.

"Daniel Susterman," Marcela said. "The man I'm looking for is named Daniel Susterman. He was abducted mid-May from the Catedral *subte* station."

"I'm sorry, ma'am," said the doctor. "I think there's been some sort of confusion." He wiped a bead of sweat from his brow.

Oakersville, Georgia—June 2011

"*Quién es?*" The door of the cottage opened a crack.

"It's me, Ma," said Luz.

"*Quién?*"

"Me. Luz. Your daughter."

The door opened a little wider, and Marcela's face appeared around the edge. "So you came."

"Did you think I wouldn't? I made it this far, didn't I?"

"Well. You might as well come in. *Vení.*"

Luz turned back toward the rest of the family and beckoned them to come closer. As Nico, Ceci, and Isaac approached the cottage, the door opened wider, and La Bobe came more clearly into view. She looked much the same as Nico remembered her, petite and thin, with that same curly hair that frizzed at the edges. She still wore those bangles that had impressed Nico so much all those years ago. But there were subtle differences. Her lips were lined with a bright red lipstick that smudged a little too much on one side, making her mouth seem a little crooked. Her reddish hair was starting to grey at the roots, and her piercing eyes had developed crow's-feet along the edges. They extended into the contours of her face like wild tree branches.

La Bobe held the door open as the family filed into the small cottage. The interior was sparse. The front room had a little table set up with a single chair and a lamp. There were no pictures on the wall, except for a large black and white photograph of an owl perched on a pine tree, which hung over the empty fireplace.

La Bobe closed the door shut behind her with a bang, and turned to face the others. There was nowhere to sit down so the Stepenskys stood in an awkward huddle in the hallway, not really sure what to do with themselves. La Bobe looked over each of them one at a time. She stared at their hair and their faces and their shoes, but Nico wasn't sure she was really seeing anything. He felt like he was in a police line-up like in all those episodes of Law & Order SVU that Cecilia always watched. La Bobe made no attempt to hug any of them, even Luz.

"*Mate!*" she called out suddenly, and Ceci jumped in surprise. "We should have mate. To the kitchen!" There was something manic in her voice, a nervous energy bubbling out the sides of the syllables.

Nico turned to a closed door on his left, which he presumed must lead to the kitchen, but La Bobe grabbed his wrist, stopping him. Her long nails dug into his skin.

"Not in there," she said fiercely. "Not that way." She directed him toward a second door on the other side of the room. As Nico followed his family into the kitchen, he shook his hand, wincing.

In the kitchen at least there were seats, and Isaac pulled out a chair at the table for Luz, who, either from the stress of the situation or from her impossibly tight bun, looked like she was on the verge of fainting. Nico and Cecilia followed their lead and sat down as well around the small wooden table. Nico could smell some sort of meat coming from the oven, and his stomach growled audibly. Cecilia glared at him, but nobody else seemed to notice. La Bobe hovered over a pot of water, but she kept turning sideways to glance at Luz. Determined not to meet her eye, Luz drummed her fingers on the table until the water turned to a boil and hummed on the stove like a wailing kitten.

La Bobe brought the pot to the table, along with a gourd filled to the top with yerba leaves. She stuck a silver straw into the leaves and with meticulous care filled the gourd up with water. The green tea-like leaves bubbled from contact with the heat, and a few brown stems surfaced at the top. La Bobe took a long drag from the silver straw, which filtered out the beverage from the steeping leaves. She drained the cup until all the liquid was gone. She glanced up at Luz, who met her eye this time. They stared hard at each other, but neither spoke. Some intense contest seemed to be going on between them, but Nico didn't understand what.

Bobe looked down first. She refilled the cup with water and passed it along to Isaac, who drank from the same straw, also until the liquid was drained. La Bobe refilled the cup again and the process continued around the room until it got to Nico, who was last.

"Thanks," said Nico as La Bobe handed him the overflowing cup.

Cecilia stepped on his toe beneath the table, almost making him drop the gourd. "You're not supposed to say thank you," she whispered. "That means you don't want any." Nico's face reddened. How did Cecilia know all this stuff anyway? He took a sip from the mate gourd but immediately stopped. The steaming drink tasted bitter and scorched his tongue. Nico's face soured, but he somehow managed to gulp it down.

He looked up to find Bobe grinning at his discomfort. She put a finger to her eye. "*Ojo*, Daniel."

"Huh." Nico put the gourd back on the table. Luz and Isaac exchanged a look.

"It's Nico," said Luz.

"*Qué, mi amor?*" asked Bobe.

"Nico. His name is Nico."

"Well, of course it is dear. And my, how big he's gotten! Had your bar mitzvah already?" she asked. Nico nodded.

"Well, let's light the candles, shall we?" Bobe motioned Luz over to a set of brass candlesticks on the counter. Together, they lit the candles then covered their eyes three times to recite the traditional blessing welcoming the Sabbath. From the back, they looked more alike than ever. After the blessing, Bobe pulled out a meatloaf from the oven and set it on the table. She sliced a generous portion for everyone but herself.

"You're not hungry?" Luz asked.

"No," answered Bobe. "These new pills the doctor gave me turn my stomach to mush."

"So you've been seeing the doctor, then? You've been listening to what he tells you to do?"

Bobe shrugged her shoulders. "He's a bit kooky, if you ask me. Just after my money, I expect. All these doctors with their fancy medications. I don't trust it."

"Ma," said Luz, exasperated. "I talked to him on the phone. He's a good doctor. He's trying to help you get better."

"Hmmmph," Bobe pulled out a compact mirror from her purse and tried to fix her smudged lipstick with her finger, but only made it worse. "I know a scoundrel when I see one, and that man is definitely a scoundrel."

"Well I trust him. Please just listen to what he tells you to do."

Bobe raised her eyebrows. "Well if *you* trust him, then I *certainly* don't. You don't exactly have a great track record when it comes to important decisions in this family, now do you."

"Nor do you," Luz countered.

"You could have called," said Bobe. "I know you were angry, but you at least could have called."

"I should have called?" asked Luz, enraged. "Would *you* have called? What would you have done in my place, *madre*? What would you have done if you realized your mother had been lying to you since you were a child?"

Nico glanced at Cecilia, who raised her eyebrows. Neither of them had heard anything about this before.

"Er, Nice place you've got here," chimed Isaac in an attempt to steer the conversation back on track.

"Thank you," said Bobe. "I like it quite a lot myself. Much better than that dump we had in *Villa Crespo*. It's so nice to have an extra room for the baby too, you can't imagine. Daniel will be happy you stopped by. He's just gone out to the *kiosco* to buy cigarettes, he should be back any minute."

Luz set her fork down with a bang. "Ma, we're in Oakersville."

"Man, she's completely lost it," whispered Ceci, half in awe.

"And the baby! She's sleeping right now, but she's gotten so much bigger, wait till you see her—" Her eyes had glazed a little, and though she was looking at Isaac, she seemed to be talking to somebody else.

"Ma," interrupted Luz.

"Dani says she looks like me, but her eyes are all his."

"MA!" Luz was shouting now. She stood up and the chair fell back behind her. "He's dead, Ma. He's been dead a long time."

"Who's dead?" asked Cecilia. "What is she talking about?"

"Daniel is," said Nico. "Our grandfather." Everyone in the room, including Bobe, turned toward him.

"It is my abuelo she's talking about, isn't it Ma?" he asked Luz. "That's what you didn't want me to see in that letter."

"Nico, this is not the time to talk about that," whispered Luz. She was still standing. Bobe leaned back against her chair and looked around, disoriented.

"But I'm right, aren't I," said Nico. Now that he had started talking, he couldn't stop. "Daniel is our grandfather. He disappeared and that's why you guys moved to Miami from Buenos Aires. That's why you came here, why you've never mentioned him before." His words came out all in one breath. He glanced at Bobe and Luz. "And that's why you two fought, right? Because you both missed him too much to get along with each other?"

"Nico, I said not now."

But Bobe's head had perked up at the sound of Daniel's name. "Daniel," she said, still staring at Nico.

"Ma, you're sick," said Luz. "You don't know what you're saying."

"No," said La Bobe, her voice rising. "No no no, I *do* know what I'm saying. No one ever believes me. The police and the neighbors and Daniel's parents didn't believe me. You didn't believe me, the doctor didn't either. But I know. I know what happened to him, I know what those monsters did to my Daniel. I know the truth." She gave Luz an accusing look. "Something *you* never wanted to hear about."

"What good is the truth when it traps you?" asked Luz. "What good was knowing the truth when it's all you ever talked about, when my father's face was the only one you could ever

see? You cared more about your dead husband than your living daughter! You have no idea. You have *no* idea what it's like to grow up not only without a father, but with half a mother as well."

La Bobe reached to refill the mate gourd but her hands shook too much to pour the water.

"I did all I could," she whispered. "I did everything in my power to try to bring him back."

"Not enough," said Luz.

"*Qué?*"

"I *said*, not enough," Luz repeated, her voice rising. "All your talk about truth. *Truth!*

The truth is, you hid behind my father's death. You used it as an excuse to ignore the present."

La Bobe began rocking back and forth in her chair. "I loved your father."

"Not as much as you loved yourself, as you loved surrounding yourself in a cloud of self-pity you didn't deserve. Not as much as you loved Pablo."

"That isn't fair," said Bobe. Luz was still standing in place, the knocked chair deserted behind her. Nico looked between the two of them, lost. Who was Pablo?

"You shouldn't have come," Bobe whispered.

Luz's nostrils flared. "How *dare* you."

Bobe shrugged. "You didn't want me around? Well fine, I left. Thanks for checking in but as you can see, I've been doing just fine here."

"You are clearly *not* fine. You can barely remember where you are. You think your own grandson is your husband."

"Well at least I can mind my own business. At least I don't hold grudges about things that happened long ago that don't concern me."

"*Of course* it concerns me!" shouted Luz. "All that time growing up, I thought it was my father you were missing. I thought it was *him* that kept you up at night—."

"It was."

"—And then I come visit your apartment one night and that, that *man* was there. What was I supposed to think?"

"Pablo came to Miami to talk, nothing more," said Bobe. "How many times do I have to tell you until you believe me?"

"How did it feel?" whispered Luz. "How did it feel, knowing that while my father was being tortured somewhere, you were busy sleeping with his best friend?"

"Holy crap," said Cecilia.

La Bobe closed her eyes and began to hum to herself.

"You're right," said Luz. "We shouldn't have come." She stormed out of the kitchen. There was a bang as the front door slammed behind her.

Isaac stood and brushed off his lap. His cheeks were bright red, and he looked like he would have preferred to be anywhere else. "Er, I guess it's time to get going. Lovely to see you again, Marcela, really. You look great. Kids, let's go." He headed out of the kitchen.

With her mouth hanging open, Cecilia rose from her chair and followed Isaac toward the door. But Nico didn't get up from his chair right away. He was still staring at La Bobe, at the way her eyes seemed to be pulsing behind her closed lids. She continued to hum, louder and louder, trapped in whatever world she was replaying in her mind.

Buenos Aires, Argentina—Septiembre 1977

By the time she reached Pablo's apartment, Marcela nearly fell over from exhaustion. She had run from the doctor's to the nearest bus stop, and when the bus hadn't come quickly enough for her, she had run for blocks and blocks. She was out of breath, but she didn't care. She

didn't care if she would ever breathe again. Her lungs felt like they were being weighed down by giant slabs of concrete, crushed against the prison of her ribcage.

"PABLO!" she screamed, banging on the door. She had forgotten all about the key.

"Pablo, open up!"

"Shhh" whispered Pablo. He let her in, and looked anxiously out the hallway before closing the door. "People will hear you."

"Let them hear. I don't care."

"What is it? What happened?"

"Fuck you."

"Huh?"

"How could you send me to him? To that...that *man*." She spit out the word like it was poison.

"The doctor, you mean? You found him?"

Marcela nodded.

"And?"

"Did you know what they do with the people who disappear?" She was near hysterical now. "Did you know?"

Pablo didn't answer.

"They throw them from the sky. They drug them and they drop them unconscious from airplanes into the river. That's what the doctor told me. That's what he had to say."

It took a minute for the words to process in Pablo's mind. And even as they did, they seemed to go right through. Airplanes and rivers and drugs and deaths. But those words seemed

so distant, too absurd to be connected with a tangible reality. And certainly too horrific to be connected with Daniel. "He must be lying," said Pablo, shaking his head. "I refuse to believe it."

Marcela sat down on the couch. She stared at the bookshelf in a kind of trance. "Why would he lie?" she whispered. "What benefit would he get from lying about a thing like that?" From her pocket she pulled out a necklace. Pablo recognized it instantly as Daniel's.

"Where did you—?"

"Why did you send me to that doctor, Pablo?" Luz's voice cracked. "I really thought I was getting Daniel back. I thought he was finally coming home."

Pablo sat next to her on the couch. He slipped his hand over hers, which was still clasping the necklace. His grip was strong and firm. She didn't pull away.

"I didn't know," Pablo whispered. "I didn't know that was what he would say." Marcela turned toward him. He was staring at the wall, and a small tear slipped out of the corner of his eye. "It should have been, me," he said. "It never should have been him." He squeezed her hand so hard that Marcela thought her knuckles might break from the force.

"Do you blame me?" he asked.

Marcela didn't answer. She closed her eyes and flickers of white danced across the inside of her eyelids. She tried to remember the sound of Daniel's laugh, the way it rolled out in staccato notes.

"Marcela," Pablo repeated, and her name sounded different in his mouth. There was something hesitant, imploring, about the way the syllables wrapped around his tongue.

"Daniel," she whispered, not so much to Pablo as to the room itself. His name was a prayer in disguise, a calling without an answer. She opened her eyes and Pablo's anxious face came into focus. The way he was sitting reminded her so much of Daniel, of how he would lean

against the armrest of their couch at home, working on one of his comics. In that moment, he was Daniel. He was Daniel before the fights, before the coup. He was Daniel at his best, Daniel alive.

And also, he wasn't. He was still Pablo, with his strong arms and broad shoulders, with his infuriating attraction and stupid, stupid political ideas. As he held her hand in his dirty living room, she felt almost as if he was a complete stranger, totally removed from her collapsing world.

She kissed him.

After a minute, Pablo pulled away. "Marcela, are you sure?"

She looked at him. "No one is ever sure," she said.

There was a desperation in their lovemaking. They clung to each other's skin as if they would never feel warmth again, as if from the friction of their bodies they could find whatever spark their lives had lost.

After, they didn't touch. They curled on opposite sides of the couch, letting the late afternoon stillness and dried sweat settle between them. Without a word, Marcela slipped into her dress and exited the apartment, leaving the key by the door.

Oakerville, Georgia—June 2011

As La Bobe rocked to herself on the table, Nico watched the silver bangles clang against one another. The disjointed sound of colliding metal clashed with La Bobe's anxious humming. After what seemed like an eternity to Nico, she stopped. Her eyes flickered slightly, like she was waking from a very long and heavy sleep. She looked up at Nico, and her face was serene and oddly blank. Nico couldn't tell if she remembered the fight with Luz only moments before.

"Bobe?" Nico asked.

"Yes, Nicolás, *mi amor*?" Nico breathed a sigh of relief. At the very least, she knew who he was right now.

"What my ma said about you and my grandfather's best friend, is it true?"

She looked Nico up and down. She seemed to be sizing him up for something, but Nico didn't know what secret test she was putting him through. "It is, and it isn't," she said at last, and her voice sounded hollow.

"But what does that mean?"

"*Vení*," Bobe said. Nico followed her out of the kitchen to the front room of the cottage. She walked to the door on the left, the one Nico had mistaken for the kitchen when he first arrived.

"Go on," she said.

Nico opened the door. The room was small and dark and smelled of chemicals. An ultraviolet lamp hung in the back corner. It took Nico's eyes a minute to adjust to its purplish light, but when they did, he could make out half a dozen cameras hanging from hooks on the wall. A clothesline hung diagonally across the ceiling, with photos in various stages of development hanging from it. A homemade photography darkroom.

"Cool," whispered Nico.

La Bobe brushed past him. She had begun to hum again. She pulled out a stack of photographs from a box on the floor and placed them on the table, where she began to divide them into three different piles. Nico stood next to her as she worked. If there was an order or reason for the divisions, he couldn't figure it out. The photos themselves were stunning, and the vast majority looked like they must have been from Oakersville and the surrounding area. All

black and white, the photos featured images of trees and wildlife, and Nico realized with a start that the picture of the owl hanging over the fireplace must have been taken by La Bobe herself, along with the photos he had found in the car.

There was one photo in the pile that was particularly striking. It was of a young deer in a forest clearing. The stag looked the camera head on, and its eyes glinted from the flash. It looked both fearless and afraid at the same time, and Nico wondered if it was possible to be both at once.

"How did you learn to do all this?" he asked.

"When living alone in a place like this, one develops a need for a hobby." She picked up the humming again and continued to divide the photos until at last she came to one near the bottom of the stack. It was different than the others, much smaller and sepia rather than black and white. A woman and two men sat around a table, and the woman had a toddler on her lap. Nico could have sworn the woman in the picture was his mother, but upon closer inspection he noticed subtle differences in the eyes. It was Marcela. The two men were both wearing *yarmulkes* and the table in front of them had glasses of wine and a seder plate.

"*Pesaj*, 1977," said Bobe, pointing to a smiling man next to her. "A month before he was taken."

"And the other person?"

"Pablo Guzman. His best friend. *My* best friend too."

"Ma said the last time you saw each other... You okay?"

Bobe had begun to rock back and forth again. "Shhh," she said. "They could be listening."

"Who could?"

"Los militares. They bug the phone lines, wire the floors. They can hear everything."

Nico looked down at the floor, and shivered. Although he knew his grandmother was a little out of it, he couldn't help but share in her anxiety.

Bobe placed one of the photographs on a crack in the floor. "It blocks the transmitters," she said. She returned the sepia-toned picture. "Pablo came to visit," she said. "In Miami. We hadn't spoken since...since Buenos Aires. I'm not sure how he tracked me down."

"And that's how my mother met him?"

Bobe nodded. "He wanted to see me again, to clear the air. But I didn't know what to say after so many years. When I looked at him, I saw Daniel staring back at me."

"But why was my Ma so mad?"

She found out Pablo and I had some...intimate relations before I left Buenos Aires. She felt it was a betrayal of Daniel's memory. And of her. It disgusted her, what I had done. And that I never told her about it. But she didn't know...she couldn't know. It was always Daniel for me."

La Bobe froze and turned off the lamp. It hissed as the UV bulb flickered out. "They're here," she whispered.

"Bobe," Nico took a step back, frightened. "There's nobody. It's just us."

She opened the door and her face was calm again. "You should probably go find your parents," she said, as if nothing had happened. "They'll be worrying about where you are."

"Are you and my Ma going to make up?" Nico couldn't help asking.

Bobe sighed. "Your mother and I love each other, much as neither of us want to admit it. But there are some things...there are some things that are difficult to get past."

Nico nodded. La Bobe pulled from the picture of the stag in the forest from the pile.

"Here, I saw you staring at this one. Keep it—a present from your *Bobe*." She smiled and handed it over to him. "Oh and Nico?"

"Yes?"

She pointed under her eye. "*Ojo*, Nico. Take care."

~ ~ ~

When Nico emerged from the cottage, he found Cecilia sitting on the stoop. "Where's Ma and Pa?" he asked.

"Last time I checked, Ma was pacing by the car, and Pa was still trying to get her to chill the fuck out. But what have *you* been up to?"

"I was inside. With Bobe."

"Did she go all psycho on you? She looked like she was about to freak."

Nico shrugged. "No. Well, maybe a little. Look, she showed me these pictures she took." He held out the photo for Ceci to see.

"So that's it?" She asked. "That's what she's been doing all this time? Living alone in this cabin and working on some weird photo album?" Cecilia whistled. "Some way to spend your golden years."

"I think it helps her focus," said Nico. "I think it brings things back to her."

"I still don't get why she came here. Of all the places to go. The middle of nowhere."

"Dunno," said Nico. "But maybe she wanted to be nowhere. Maybe that's what she needed."

Ceci looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. "At any rate," she said, "I don't think we'll be staying the whole summer anymore."

Nico nodded in agreement.

"Why do you think Ma never told us what happened?" asked Cecilia. "About Bobe and our grandfather and that Pablo guy."

Nico shrugged. "I think she wanted to protect us. And...even if she had wanted to tell us, I'm not sure she would have known how."

Buenos Aires, Argentina—Febrero 1978

The sun was getting lower on the horizon, and the docks along Río de la Plata were beginning to empty. Only a handful of people remained—a couple walking hand in hand and a few scattered fishermen, waiting patiently by their rods for a bite. Marcela and Luz sat at a bench towards the end of the pier, watching the sun sink slowly from the sky. It wasn't much to look at. The river was as it always was, a swirl of muddy red pigments. The water, even when it had been cleaned, always seemed a little bit dirty. Tainted, thought Marcela. What kind of a people chooses to build a city on such a filthy body of water?

There was a cough behind her, and a hand on her shoulder. Marcela jumped and instinctively reached for Luz's hand. Behind her stood Zaydel, his beard white and fringed at the edges.

"Oh—It's just you. Thank you for coming to meet me."

"I'm an old, lonely man," gruffed Zaydel. "You think I have anywhere else to be?"

Marcela gave him a small smile. "Thank you all the same."

Zaydel made an attempt to sit on the other side of Luz, but Luz shrunk away from him and clung closer to her mother.

"She's shy," said Marcela by way of apology. "Luz, why don't you go play with the pigeons over there at the edge of the dock." Luz obliged, but went only a few feet away. Marcela didn't ever like her to be out of eyesight.

"Shy gets you nowhere," said Zaydel disapprovingly. "In my day, they used to make all the shy kids read in front of the whole class everyday at school till they got a grip of their nerves. She's getting bigger though. How old now?"

"Almost six, although I barely believe it myself," said Marcela. "I sometimes worry how much she picks up on, what with everything with Dan—" she faltered. "What with everything that's happened."

Zaydel nodded but offered no response. He stared at the river, and, as if reading Marcela's mind, he said, "this river looks like the biggest piece of *carajo* I've ever seen."

"It's not just the river, it's this whole city," said Marcela. "Did you know, you're the only one who still meets with me. The women from my class pass on the other side of the street when I walk by. Nobody wants their child to have piano lessons with me anymore. It's like I have an infectious disease and if they get too close they might catch it."

Zaydel nodded. "Grief can be a disease to people who have not felt it themselves."

Marcela's eyes flashed. "It's not grief. There's no evidence he's gone, nothing definitive. He could still come home."

"You know," said Zaydel, "when I was a little boy, there was a pogrom in the town next to me. I remember my father taking me in his wagon the next day to go help the survivors. I must have been around six or seven. As we entered the town, I remember everything was shattered. They killed all the men. Every one."

"Why are you telling me this."

Zaydel coughed. "Because it's time to let go. Because when someone makes a war on you, you bury your dead and you keep going. We Jews are wanderers. We went through the desert and we went through Babylon and Auschwitz and now we are here and someday we will be elsewhere. The point is, I loved that fool of a boy like my own son. But he's not coming home, *niña*."

"He promised he would. It was the one promise he made me."

"And? People make promises they cannot keep. We are liars and we are dust. The only truth comes from *Adonai*. He's not coming back." Zaydel's voice was gentle but firm. The words ricocheted through Marcela's mind. *He's not coming back.*

"Have you thought about leaving?"

"Where would I even go?"

"Uruguay. Or Brazil. Some people can get visas to the United States from there, I hear."

"If I stay, he's real," Marcela whispered. "As long as I keep searching, it means he's alive. It's when I give up that he's really gone."

"Then let him be gone," said Zaydel. "Let the dead be dead."

After a few minutes, Zaydel left. Marcela glanced over at Luz. She was jumping in front of the pigeons. They scattered in fright for a few minutes but quickly returned. Marcela glanced back at that water. She imagined Daniel's body tumbling down into the dirty river, imagined the crack of the water as he sunk deeper and deeper into its grip.

The tears came. Real tears, not ghosts of ones found in the shakes of her shoulders. Marcela could sense Luz looking at her, but couldn't stop. The drops clung to her cheeks, their salty sweetness slipping into the corners of her lips.

She let out a scream. It bounced against the surface of the water, dissolved into the mess of mud and liquid. And from somewhere deep in the ocean, she thought she heard an echo back.

Appendix I: Historical References

This project contains elements of historical fiction. Although all characters and scenes are purely fictional, their experiences reflect those of the estimated 30,000 people who disappeared in Argentina during the period of 1976 to 1983. Many sources informed this work, but the following were particularly influential:

Feierstein, Daniel, et al. *Informe sobre la situación de los detenidos-desaparecidos judíos durante el genocidio perpetrado en Argentina*. (Report on the situation of Jewish detainees disappeared during the genocide perpetrated in Argentina.) DAIA Center for Social Studies, Journal of Social Sciences, 1999.

Oberti, Alejandra and Skura, Susana. *Antisemitismo y Dictadura en Argentina* (Anti-Semitism and Dictatorship in Argentina.) Memoria Abierta, 2007.

Sabato, Ernesto, et al. *Nunca Más: the report of the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared*. New York: Faber & Faber, 1986. Print.

The following people and organizations were also invaluable sources of research:

- Daniel Feierstein and Emmanuel Taub of *Universidad Tres de Febrero*, Buenos Aires, Argentina.
- The staff of *Parque de la Memoria: Monumento a las Víctimas del Terrorismo del Estado*, Buenos Aires, Argentina.
- The oral archive projects of *Memoria Abierta*, Buenos Aires, Argentina.
- The archives of *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Appendix II: *Literary References*

This novella explores the role of secrets and secret keeping in an individual family, but on a broader level, it examines the generational effect of trauma and the Jewish experience in South America and the United States. The writing was influenced by novels on similar themes of human rights memory in Latin America, as well as a range of works in the genre of modern Jewish American fiction including:

Allende, Isabel. *The House of the Spirits*. New York: Dial Press, 1985. Print.

Bialet, Graciela. *Los Sapos de la Memoria* (Toads of Memory). Córdoba, Argentina: CB Ediciones, 2008. Print.

Chabon, Michael. *The Yiddish Policemen's Union: A Novel*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007. Print.

Englander, Nathan. *The Ministry of Special Cases*. London: Vintage Books, 2008. Print.

Krauss, Nicole. *The History of Love*. New York: Norton, 2006. Print.

Safran Foer, Jonathan. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005. Print.

Appendix III: Glossary of Terms

Listed alphabetically. All terms are in Argentine Castellano/Spanish unless otherwise noted.

Ausencia—Absence.

Adonai—God, my lord (Hebrew).

Afikomen—A piece of Matza that is hidden during the Passover Seder. After the meal, children search for the *afikomen* to eat as dessert; the seder cannot officially conclude without finding the *afikomen* (Hebrew).

La Bobe—Spanish version of “Bubbe”; Yiddish for grandmother.

Boliche—Nightclub.

Boludo—An asshole or idiot. Often used colloquially as a term of endearment between friends.

Café con leche—“Coffee with milk”; a popular coffee beverage in Argentina.

La Casa Rosada—The building that houses Argentina’s executive branches, similar to the White House in the United States. Literally, the Pink House.

Cerveza—Beer.

Chai—“Life” (Hebrew).

Chamullero—A “sweet talker,” generally in reference to a man trying to hit on a girl.

Che—Slang commonly used in Buenos Aires to indicate a buddy or pal.

The Dirty War—A common name used to describe the period of State Terrorism in Argentina from 1976 to 1983. The term is controversial in Argentina because of its connotation of “war” rather than “genocide” and as such is generally avoided in human rights circles.

Dulce de leche—A traditional Argentine candy derived from caramelized milk.

Facundo—An Argentine gaucho made famous by an 1845 book by Domingo Sarmiento entitled “Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism.” One of the cornerstones of Argentine Literature, the book presents early Argentine settlers as harbingers of civilization and nationalism.

Gam Ze Ya'avor—“This too shall pass” (Hebrew).

Junta Militar—Military Council. In Argentina, commonly used in reference of the board of Army officials who held power during the dictatorship from 1976 to 1983.

Locutorio—A payphone/call center.

Mate—A popular Argentine beverage made of yerba leaves and served in a calabash gourd.

Matza—The unleavened bread Jews are required to eat during the holiday of Passover (Hebrew).

Medialuna—A common Argentine pastry similar to a sweetened croissant.

Militar—Militant or soldier.

Milonga—A traditional form of Argentine music that is predecessor to the tango.

Montoneros—A Peronist guerilla group active during the 1960s and 70s that mobilized to destabilize conservative governments in order to return Juan Perón to power. Infamous for the kidnapping and execution of former Argentine dictator Pedro Aramburu in 1970, the Montoneros were made political targets by the military junta that came to power in 1976.

Ojo—Literally, eye. Colloquially, “watch out” or “pay attention.”

Panadería—A bakery.

Pesaj—Spanish transliteration of the Hebrew word “Pesach.” The Jewish holiday celebrating the Exodus from Egypt, commonly known as Passover in the US.

Porteño—A resident of Buenos Aires.

Quilmes—Argentine beer company.

Río de la Plata—Sometimes called “River Plate” in English, the geographical body of water that forms of a basin of the Atlantic Ocean and separates Argentina from Uruguay.

Rock Nacional—Argentine term for regional rock & roll music.

Shtetl—A small Jewish village (Yiddish).

Subte—Short for “subterráneo”; the Argentine term for “subway.”

Taxista—Taxi driver.

Videla, Jorge Rafael—The senior commander of the Argentine military and de facto president of Argentina from 1976 to 1981. One of the principle players in the 1976 coup and the state terrorism that followed.

Yarmulke—Jewish skull cap (Yiddish).

Yud—A small Hebrew letter that indicates a “y” sound.

Appendix IV: *Acknowledgments*

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